

“Lent, and the Phoenix.”

There’s an ancient Egyptian myth about a bird called the Phoenix. And according to the myth, the Phoenix recreates itself by making a burnt offering of itself. First, it carefully builds a nest, and then settles down into it, and finally it bursts into flames. From the ashes of that holocaust, there emerges a magnificent new bird. A new creation. And the new Phoenix, according to the myth, is even more lovely, more glorious, than its previous incarnation.

Now think about the courage the Phoenix needed, to go through this process. It knows that it must die, before it can be reborn. But the death it must undergo is no ordinary, simple death. The Phoenix must be burned alive, and burned so completely that nothing is left but ashes. It takes great courage to go through this process, but it also takes a great deal of faith in the process itself.

Ash Wednesday presents each of us an opportunity to die; to die to ourselves. But Ash Wednesday also presents us with the hope, the promise, of a new birth. And the purpose of today’s liturgy, is not only to remind us of our humble beginnings— “Remember that you are dust...” — but also to encourage us to bring to God, all the things that keep us from becoming what God has envisioned for us.

Fortunately, the journey we’re invited to join doesn’t involve any self-immolation. Rather, it offers us a Litany of Penitence. And if we take the words of that litany seriously— if we’re honest to God, and to ourselves, and don’t just go through the motions— that litany will help “burn away” those things which stand between us and God’s vision for us. And like the Phoenix, the first step we need to take, is to put our entire life into the nest. And that nest for us is the Season of Lent.

Therefore, Ash Wednesday challenges us to take a good look at our lives: To look at how we treat one another; To look at how we care for the earth; To look at how, if at all, our lives offer praise and thanks and glory to God. And, if you listened to the Gospel reading, then you realize that we’re to do this without any fanfare. And if we find things in our lives that ought not be there, then we are invited to toss them into the nest of Lent.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus tells us not to store up treasures on this earth. At one level, I'm certain that he was talking about literal treasures— those things we accumulate, and value so much, that they overshadow even God. But at another level, I think Jesus was also talking about certain attitudes, or dispositions that we may “treasure,” or hold close to our hearts, such as:

Those grudges we bear against one another;

The anger we allow to simmer beneath our forced smiles;

The rumors we allow to go round and round;

The finger-pointing and shaming that we participate in;

The inability to love ourselves and each other with forgiveness.

Too often, we embrace these things, ugly though they may be, and even treasure the pain they bring into our lives, because we think they bring a certain amount of power into our lives. They give us a false sense of importance, and control. But we also hold onto them because we're afraid of a world without them; afraid of the freedom that comes from letting them go. Perhaps we need to “fast” from these behaviors; to give them up for Lent.

In that portion of his letter we heard this morning, Paul suggests that we need to be reconciled to God. And the place to begin, is to be reconciled with each another. And when we begin to forgive each other, the energy that we had been wasting there, can be used to cherish each other, and uphold each other.

The colors we use for the Season of Lent are fairly somber, and they remind us of where we are now. They remind us that there are things we have, that need to be burned away: actions, habits, and attitudes. But these colors also remind us to listen for the voice of God. But these colors also point us toward the bright colors of Easter. And in revealing to us the vast chasm that lies between where we are, and where we can be, these colors remind us that now is the time to fast from those things which turn us from God.

It takes courage and faith to view these colors, just as it takes courage and faith to look honestly at ourselves. And it takes courage and faith to follow the examples that Jesus left for us. Yet, day after day, men and women make that

choice because they know that the joy of Easter is their joy. And they, and we, know that we will all be raised with Christ on that Easter morn. And at our awakening, our faces will shine, and our hearts will be glad, with the knowledge that our's is a God of forgiveness, and a God of new beginnings.

Knowing all this, may not make the self-discipline, and gut-wrenching honesty, that this season calls for from each of us, any easier. But knowing that Easter does follow Lent, however, can bring a measure of faith and courage to our exploration of self and God. And from the ashes of Ash Wednesday, we can rise, knowing that our dying brings eternal life with Christ Jesus.

The Phoenix knew that, in order to have a new life, it would have to die to this life. This paradox is at the center of our lives as children of God. We remember this paradox whenever someone is baptized, whenever we take part in Holy Communion, and whenever we say the words "...forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." In order to live more fully, we must strive to become new creations in Christ. And daily we die to self, in order to live as God calls us to live; with lives filled with joy and compassion, and with peace and hope.

To become like that mythical Phoenix, is not only our Lenten challenge, but it is also our Lenten promise.