

Ash Wednesday
Luke 9: 28-36
Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

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Episcopal Church of the Resurrection
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This past Sunday, the gospel lesson walked us up to the top of the mountain with Peter, James and John where they witnessed God's glory being made real in the person of his son Jesus; made real in God's voice from the cloud of mystery. "This is my son whom I love. Listen to him," God said.

Reading between the lines, I wonder if God really meant, "STOP TALKING, PEOPLE! Stop talking about things that don't matter. Stop. Look and listen to Jesus."

Vicariously through Peter, James, and John, as Jesus was transfigured, we gazed at God as God really is. It is now three days later -- Ash Wednesday -- and we get a glimpse of who we really are. Because of who Jesus is and what he did for us, there is no reason to be afraid of what we see. We have these two voices ringing in our ears as we begin the season of Lent.

"Look and Listen to Jesus," says God the Father.

Jesus taught about how to be and how not to be; through his teaching and through his actions. He paid attention to people who the rest of society ignores. He stood up to people and institutions who wanted to control God and God's love. He listened to what people weren't saying, to get to what they really meant, and who they really were. He made them whole and recognized then calmed their fears.

The other voice that we recall from that mountaintop belongs to Jesus himself. "Get up and don't be afraid." Hold the memory of God's glory in your heart and take it with you. Get up and don't let fear keep you from doing what God has given you to do.

Today we are invited to begin our Lenten journey. And today, Ash Wednesday, of all days in the church year, we are invited to focus on ourselves. I hope we can still hear Jesus voice saying we don't need to be afraid of what we find. Yesterday was Mardi Gras and in various places people had fun wearing masks. Ash Wednesday is the day we take off those masks. On Ash Wednesday, we are no longer on the mountain top. We are in familiar territory and we become real again. God invites us to start all over again.

In a moment we will hear a call to self-examination and an invitation to a Holy Lent. Together we will walk ourselves through the list of ways we intentionally, or unintentionally distort God's love for us, freely offered. Because we are so clever, we have come up with many different ways to block God's love in our life, and to keep

God's love from those around us. Deep down we already know this about ourselves. Deep down we know we need God's help to change.

Lent is a time when we can shine the light of Christ into our hearts and see what actually is in there. It is a time to make room, once again, for God's love as we clean our lives up a bit. Yes, we are imperfect. But we are forgiven. The purpose of walking through this self-examination is to know ourselves as God knows us: imperfect AND forgiven. Then we ask for God's help in reorienting our lives in God's direction as his forgiven people.

Today is a day to remind ourselves that God knows us even better than we know ourselves and he STILL loves us. It is a day to remember that the person we uncover upon closer examination is exactly the person for whom Jesus died. The person God loves.

Once we uncover the faults we would rather hide, our focus changes. That's what repentance is. We can turn from obsessing on our sinful, imperfect selves and focus instead on the new gift of life which is ours in Christ.

Jesus says, Get up and don't be afraid.

The faults we identify, the sins which we can name AND the ones we can't even uncover are no longer obstacles to salvation. Not to God anyway. Once we know who we are and how we place barriers to God's love in our lives, we can begin to remove those barriers from that central place in our lives where God wishes to dwell.

The traditional Lenten disciplines of self-denial, alms-giving, study and prayer are not tests to measure our commitment. They are tools which shift attention away from our weaknesses toward that holy life to which God continually calls us. Study and silence and prayer provide us with the light needed to illumine the dark places in our lives, as we make room in our lives for the One who knows exactly who we are: beloved and forgiven.

God tells us time and time again, Lent after Lent, Easter after Easter, that God loves us no matter what. That we are powerless to keep God from loving us. That we are made of stardust as well as ash. That we are loved beyond comprehension.

Thanks be to God.