

If Lent is about giving up those things that keep us apart from God, then here is what I am wondering: what old beliefs and religious baggage we are carrying around that we need to let go of in order to encounter the living God in new ways?

Our worship began today with the Decalogue. It is true that we are apt to make idols of those things that are less than God and that the second commandment is about putting first things first. We can make money, or nation, or even family into idols—giving these penultimate things our ultimate allegiance. Lent is about returning to the jealous God who has brought us out of bondage and is leading us toward the Promised Land.

But sometimes our idols are the images we have of “god” that actually keep us from encountering the true God. One of the idols I invite you to let go of this Lent is what I sometimes call the “Santa Claus God:” the god who is making his list and checking it twice and who knows if you’ve been bad or good so you better be good for goodness sake! I know I’m mixing up my liturgical seasons but hear me out! I invite you to let go of all of those images of God that keep you infantilized and maybe we can start here. Because the problem with thinking of God as “Santa Claus” is that Lent becomes a season where we try to be really, really good—and if we aren’t careful we start to believe that somehow if we get it all right and don’t sneak any chocolate we’ll earn our reward on Easter morning. On the other side of things we begin to think that prayer is simply about reciting a never-ending wish list of things we want from God.

The problem, I think, is that all of us have some old tapes playing in our lives—and maybe one of the gifts of Lent is that we become still enough to listen to those old tapes and then figure out which parts are still valid and what parts we need to let go of. Maybe your old tapes come from the nuns you had in grammar school, or a stern pastor, or a well-intentioned Vacation Bible School teacher—or maybe from a parent or grandparent. And to be fair, let’s remember that we can’t be sure what those nuns or pastors or VBS folks really did say or what they meant to say. Memory is a funny thing and we heard many of those messages filtered through our own young ears. Nevertheless we all have these old tapes and some of it leads to health but other parts may be keeping us from hearing and experiencing the living God in fresh ways.

I recently had a conversation with a long-time Episcopalian about Ash Wednesday; she was against it. And here is the thing: I agreed with all of her reasons for being against it. If Ash Wednesday or the forty days of Lent focus on fear or guilt or shame, then they will destroy the faith that is in us. But guilt and fear and shame are tools of the devil—not of God. They will not lead us to true repentance and amendment of life and Easter morning. They can never lead us to the heart of God.

But here’s the thing: I don’t believe for a moment that Ash Wednesday or Lent are supposed to be about inflicting guilt and fear and shame. I think that it has more to do with our old tapes when this season is misused and misunderstood. And so we need to let that go. What happens if we give up shame and guilt and fear for Lent? We may well hear the reminder that we are dust in new ways—we may well remember that we are human and not divine, that we don’t have all the time in the world, that the time to live is now. We may well encounter God anew—speaking to us in and through Word and Sacraments and the sacred stories of our own lives.

In today's first reading, we hear about how the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision. That's code language—so don't miss it. God doesn't tap Abraham on the shoulder and have a face-to-face chat. Maybe that's an old tape we need to let go of. We sometimes think (maybe because of the nuns or the pastor or the VBS person or maybe just because that's what we thought we heard as kids) that somehow the way God calls people is that the skies open up and God speaks in English, as clear as day and says things like: "hello Rich...this is God...go directly to seminary—do not pass go and do not collect \$200." It doesn't work that way, though—not in our lives and actually upon closer reading we discover not in the Bible either.

We sometimes read too quickly, eliminating the doubt and the struggle and the uncertainty that Abraham must surely have been feeling as he wondered if in fact Eliazar of Damascus might indeed be his only heir and that he needed to settle for that. The voice of reason must have told him that—since neither he nor Sarah were getting any younger. Yet somehow the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision. I think you need to be extra quiet to hear that voice.

God isn't encountered directly. It would kill us. Even Moses sees God's backside. The mystics and prophets and poets have their visions and dreams. The rest of go on "hints and guesses"—as best we can.

So maybe that's another idol we need to let go of. Because the problem is that if we are sitting around and waiting for God to walk into the room and for the skies to open and for God to tap us on the shoulder then we will almost certainly miss the ways by which God is already speaking to us in and through our lives, in and through other people, in and through the life of this congregation, in and through our ordinary encounters at home and in the world.

*The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision.* And the message is essentially this:

- Do not be afraid
- I am your shield
- The future is in my hands—not your's. Trust me!

And the text says that Abraham does trust God. The promise is renewed and the covenant is remembered and God reckons Abraham's trust as righteousness.

I wonder is this pattern is an invitation to all of the children of Abraham—Jew and Christian and Muslim—in every age. A kind of touchstone experience we come back to in Lent—to the core meaning of faith which is not about our doctrines or our behavior or even about our values. All of those things have their place. But first and foremost is the fundamental question raised by the Decalogue and by the patriarchs: where is your trust? Do you dare to put your trust in the living God?

Do not be afraid;  
 God is your shield;  
 Do not worry about tomorrow.

It's hard to hear that message—let alone believe it—and then let it sink in and live it. In the midst of all of the clutter of our lives there are countless voices insisting on precisely the

opposite: that we should be very afraid—afraid of the terrorists, afraid that the market will crash, afraid of sexual predators, afraid of each other. It is easy to believe that God helps only those who help themselves, that we control our own destinies, that we can measure out our lives in teaspoons and keep ourselves safe.

In our fear and anxiety, we think that if we give up certain things then somehow God may love us more. But that's not possible! God is already crazy about us! Lent isn't an opportunity to manipulate God. We give up certain things so we can strip away the excess and be still in the presence of the living God—so that *we* can listen better. We go into the wilderness not for guilt but for quiet. So I wonder what happens if we allow ourselves to risk hearing the Word of the Lord from the pages of an ancient text and into this time and place:

Do not be afraid;  
God is your shield;  
Do not worry about tomorrow.

Lent is a time for discovery. I pray that we might put the “wild” back into this wilderness season in order to seek and question and wonder and risk. I wonder what happens when we take on the practices of Lent that we were invited to on Ash Wednesday: ancient practices that still hold within them the seeds of transformation. We hold up the Decalogue (the heart of which Jesus summarized in four words: love God, love neighbor.) To meditate on that is to be invited into a process of self-examination and to acknowledge where we have fallen short—and then to seek amendment of life and true repentance. We can pray, and fast, and meditate on the scriptures. We can give alms. We will not get it right all the time. No one ever has. Fortunately, though, God is merciful.

But as children of Abraham we can choose to walk by faith. We can let go of our fear, and turn our hearts to God. May God reckon that to us as righteousness, as the journey continues to unfold.

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