**Ash Wednesday 2019- Observing Lent**

**Introduction:**

Last week I was struck by a front page spread in the *New York Times* (2/26/19) about the “World’s Largest Religious Gathering” that takes place every 6 years in India. Called Kumbh Mela, it is a time when Hindu “worshippers come to wash away their sins at the spot where the Ganges and Yamuna rivers converge with the invisible and mythic tributary known as the Sarasvati.” There are interesting details about the pilgrimage this year – as toilets, transportation options, round-the-clock access to electricity and water, art exhibits and carnivals were added, in addition to the new accommodations which were more upscale than the ascetics smoke-filled tents. These previously unavailable luxury accommodations were called “glamping options, or glamourous camping…At one of the new riverside luxury camps…guests sipped on barista-crafted lattes outside of tents that cost as much as $500 a night to stay in.”(*NYTimes, International*, 2/26/19 p. A11)

Interesting that this festival coincides with the Christian celebration of Lent. Some of the issues are the same: there is the common human need for cleansing for sin – a need seen in most religions and a central focus of Lent in Christendom. There is also, unfortunately, the tension between the focus of a religious pilgrimage or observance and the desire for comfort and worldly pleasures to make that observance palatable.

From that perspective Lent has had some negative connotations for some in the supreme emphasis on personal sacrifice and abstinence have held center stage. Bob Webber in his book *The Services of the Christian Year* notes that:

“Protestants of a more austere piety have made much of the need for a season of self-denial as a test of pious discipline.” What is given up, like chocolates or movies or restaurant eating, a meal a day or a partial fast with only water for a week or two, is optional. For Catholics there was obligatory abstinence.” Such sacrifice has not always gone down well in our affluent, comfort-oriented, pleasure based society. Like some Hindus, many want to temper the abstinence with a more luxury ordered “glamping” that is more comfortable. Ah.

But let’s look a bit closer at the real meaning of Lent. For Christians Lent is the 40 day period to prepare people’s hearts for Good Friday where the supreme cleansing of sins once for all was made by Jesus Christ.

* It is set apart as a special season of fasting, penitence, prayer and almsgiving.
* It is called Lent because it always comes in the spring of the year and the old Saxon word lent means spring.
* The 40 day Lenten season corresponds to the 40 days which Jesus spent fasting in the wilderness.
* The first day of Lent is called Ash Wednesday in remembrance of the early church practice of sprinkling ashes on the heads of penitents in token of humiliation and sorrow for sin.

This year I would like us to start the Lenten season of renewal with our response to Christ’s love. His sacrifice shows the full extent of God’s love for us and calls forth our response of sacrificial giving, prayer and the sacrifice of extra time we set aside to be with Him these 40 days

Song: *The Power of Your love*

**Meditation**

Bob Webber notes, that “rather than a season for giving up something, let us consider Lent a season of taking on something….[From this perspective] Lent is a double journey – a journey together (and alone) toward the mystery of God’s redemptive embrace in the death and resurrection of Christ. At the same time, it is a journey into the depths of our humanity.” (Webber, Ibid., p. 228)

The early church celebrated Lent “as a season of preparation and formation for initiation into the church at Easter. The 40 days of preparation involved the whole church, not only those preparing to be baptized. The journey of discipline, prayer and instruction, which was known in the early church as the catecheumenate, provided those already baptized with a yearly reentry into the meaning and deepening range of commitment entailed by baptism. (p. 228)

In this season of renewal there are also two common images surrounding Lent – both in the early church and today. One is “the image of the desert way – clearly derived from the way of Jesus in the desert. Only by intentionally entering the desert way can we be kept from idolatry and perhaps from spiritual self-indulgence.

You remember that Jesus was 40 days in the wilderness surrounded by wild animals. If you are familiar with the terrain where He was, it’s a barren and desolate wilderness.

Some people come into this season actually feeling that barrenness and desolation in their emotions or body. We all go through times like this in our walk with the Lord. This season is a time of renewal, a time to meet God in that wilderness, a time to draw closer in dependence on Him and seek His sustaining, strengthening, delivering Presence.

The other image is prayer which involves fasting, almsgiving, and solidarity with all who hunger and thirst – [both literally and spiritually.] Some people combine almsgiving and fasting by skipping a lunch once a week or the cost of movies or some other “luxury” and then donating that money saved each week to an outreach ministry or to the church. “The point is to take away whatever extraneous distractions normally keep us focused on our own agenda and pleasures instead of on God. The goal is to grow closer to the Lord and deal with the human struggle within us against spiritual self-deception” (Webber, Ibid., p. 229 ).

Please pray with me: Lord, take us to the cross, and overwhelm us with Your great mercy. At the time of our greatest need, You surprised us with your wondrous love. Jesus offered his life for us to remove our dreadful curse. As you draw us into this renewing relationship of love [this season] may we respond with gratitude“ and renew our heart’s commitment to you..(Webber, Ibid., p.236 )

Lenten hymn: *Amazing Love*

The remainder of the service will deal with confession, a song, prayers of confession and then return to a focus on Christ’s love and prayers of gratitude and surrender. The need for Confession:

Scripture reading:

Confession and Cleansing: I John 1:8-10

Confessing for our nation -Daniel’s model prayer Daniel 9:3-11, 15, 19

Song: *Once Again*  Brad Jones

Prayers of confession

Responding to God’s love in Christ

God’s demonstration of love: I John 4:9-12

Song: *O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus*  Brad Jones

Prayers of gratitude and surrender

Song of Going Forth: *There is a Redeemer*  Brad Jones

Closing Lenten prayer:

Journey with us, O holy God, as we begin our way to the cross. Sharpen our focus that our attention may center more on You than ourselves. Lead us through the shadows of darkness and prepare our hearts that we might be a people of prayer, ready to receive and respond to your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. In his name we pray .