

FEB 10 2016 ASH WEDNESDAY

Invitation to a Holy Lent

Lessons: Joel 2:1-12; Psalm 51; 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday is a day to mark the beginning of the Lenten Season. It is an invitation to the experience of a Holy Lent. Lent is a chance to renew our commitment to God, to reflect on our lives and respond to Jesus' call for us to love and forgive one another.

Barbara de Angelis is known for her teachings on relationships. I like her thoughts on finding relationship to God found in the Handbook for the Spirit: For the Love of God. Her approach to finding nourishment and sustenance is to act for ourselves with the intention to seek and to find.

She says that bringing God into your life is like bringing someone to your home. First you send the person an invitation. If it's a specific invitation, he or she is more apt to accept than if you say, "Oh, by the way, just stop over some time."

So, consciously, actively, send God an invitation.

Go to the ocean or mountains or a park or a church or light some candles at home. Wherever you decide to be, sit and say formally, "God, I am ready for you to reveal yourself in my life. I don't know how it's going to happen. I don't know if I'll recognize you when you get here, but I'm ready for a relationship with you. Send me signs. Send me the proper teacher. Send me the right path. Give me the wisdom to notice when these things arrive. Give me the strength and the courage to travel down that path and begin to explore the invisible world.

Then her statement is, "If you sincerely pray to experience God's presence into your life, it will come." But you must create opportunities for the invitation to be answered—moments when you are open to feeling God reveal Godself within you.

And so our scriptures for Ash Wednesday confirm this need to give God an invitation to journey with us, to help us create silent spaces for prayer and habits that will ground us in God's Spirit.

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10 This letter, written to the church in Corinth, has a key word—the word is "now." Paul says, "See, now, is the acceptable time; see, now, is the day of salvation."

So, friends, let's not put off that invitation to God to visit us and abide with us. The word is "now."

And from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6) the invitation is a call to direct any acts of piety or goodness toward God. Start with yourself, do your part, look within yourself, examine yourself and ask if where your heart is there is your treasure.

Many years ago when I was a minister in the Boston, MA area, I traveled to Rome, Italy on a pastoral study leave with my daughter Martha; we had the opportunity to climb the

Holy Stairs (Scala Sancta) to the chapel of St Lawrence. We climbed 28 marble stairs on our knees, as was the custom for pilgrims who wanted to honor the passion of Jesus. I thought about us doing this and wondered why it was compelling, at the time, to physically challenge ourselves to climb those stairs on our knees for the spiritual experience.

According to the Catholic tradition, they are the steps leading up to the [praetorium](#) of [Pontius Pilate](#) in [Jerusalem](#) on which [Jesus Christ](#) stepped on his [way to trial](#) during the events known as the [Passion](#). The stairs were, reputedly, brought to Rome by [St. Helena](#) in the fourth century.

Did this act help honor Jesus and his Passion? Did it bring me closer to Jesus, his life, his suffering, his death? Perhaps. I know I wanted that experience, this opportunity to be closer to God in Christ by suffering the pain of the climb. Those acts we take part in to bring us closer to the one who calls us to the spiritual life may be outward ways to connect. But, as you know and I know, it was not the stairs that made the difference but what was happening inside me.

The ashes we will receive mark a season of new beginnings. We want to explore that part of ourselves we call our spiritual selves. We want to pray more, read and study more, fast, meditate, or do whatever it takes to connect ourselves in a mystical union with the Divine.

It is a gesture that explicitly calls to mind our mortality. “Remember you are human” or “From dust you came, to dust you will return” or the words “away with the old and in with the new.”

By giving this invitation for God to stop over, we decide not to lead willy-nilly lives, buffeted about by every changing fad and circumstance. We want, we need, discipline, rhythm, and design to shape our work, our worship, and our relationships. May we, indeed, rely upon a deep, existential trust in the process of life itself, a trust in the providence of God.

We take seriously the prophet [Joel's call](#) to return to God with all our hearts, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. We rend our hearts, not our clothing; we return to God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

May God be with you as you experience this Lenten Season as a holy time, a time to be with God in a new way that feeds the thirst and hunger of the longing heart.