

“Return to Me with All Your Heart”

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

March 2, 2022

Ash Wednesday

I have not been in the habit of preaching a sermon of any kind on Ash Wednesday, but this year is different. I'll keep this brief. I just want to offer a few reflections about where we are right now.

This past Sunday, we had 79 people at church for worship, physically in person. There were at least 21 more watching online. That's a guaranteed 100 people, by far the largest number we have had on a Sunday since the start of the pandemic two years ago. I was talking with one of my colleagues yesterday, who reported that they had a large attendance too. He said, "It felt like a breath of fresh air." That's also how I felt; it felt so immensely *good* to see the sanctuary relatively full again, after so long.

A lot of that, of course, has to do with the recession of the Omicron variant, and the general relaxing of pandemic restrictions. It's not gone – one of my kids' friends here in Mason currently has Covid – but it's greatly diminished. We can all pray that it continues to recede, and that it – or some other variant – doesn't come back. It's like a cancer that seems to be going into remission. It might return ... or it might not. It might be very dangerous, or it might be less severe. We just don't know.

So we have been granted a bit of a reprieve, at least for now. I find the timing somewhat ironic. It was during Lent two years ago that the pandemic hit and everything shut down; now it's receding rapidly just as Lent is beginning again. Outside, the birds are chirping, the sun is shining, the air almost feels warm; we are getting the first hints of spring. We're in a new season ... in more ways than one.

Today marks the beginning of Lent. The word "Lent" comes from an Old English word that means "springtime." The word "Lent" did not originally have any kind of theological or liturgical significance. It simply marked a season, a season of growth and rebirth. A season that we can all *feel*.

And how are *you* feeling, as we begin this season of Lent? I can't speak for you. For me, I feel a tremendous sense of *relief*, and a profound feeling of *hope*, that is coupled with a great deal of *exhaustion*. These past two years have been *so incredibly hard*, in so many ways. I feel like I need some kind of spiritual sustenance, some bread in the wilderness, some manna from heaven, *something* to enrich and enliven and nourish my very weary soul. Maybe you are feeling somewhat similarly.

I'd like to encourage you – *strongly* encourage you – to make the most of this season of Lent. *Do something for your soul* these next 40 days. There are 40-day Lenten devotionals, of course, and we do recommend those. But I know that I, for one, need something *more* than that. Something deeper, something richer, something that will abundantly water the very parched places in my soul.

I've been thinking about some of the Christian books I've read over the years that have had a huge impact on me. There was *Beginning to Pray*, by Anthony Bloom. There were the *Confessions* of

Saint Augustine. There were Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Some essays by Martin Luther King, especially his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Some books by C. S. Lewis, like *Mere Christianity* and *The Screwtape Letters*, which were written for adults, and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and its sequels, written for children. And then there are classic books that I would *like* to read someday, like *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, *Orthodoxy* by G. K. Chesterton, *The Pursuit of God* by A. W. Tozer (I started that one years ago), *On the Incarnation* by Athanasius of Alexandria, Augustine's *City of God*, *The Interior Castle* by Teresa of Avila, *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers, and *Revelations of Divine Love* by Julian of Norwich. The list of great Christian classics is long.

I've just given you a list of some of the greatest treasures the church has given to the world. Time and again, Christians who have read these books say that they made a *huge* impression on them.

What if you were to pick something you've never read before, some great Christian classic that has touched and deepened and enriched soul after soul after soul, and spend Lent reading it?

I picked a book for myself earlier this week. It was something I was supposed to read way back in my seminary days. I don't think I finished it; I know that I didn't fully *appreciate* it at the time. I also know that it's a book that has immensely helped many pastors. It's high time I take a second look.

I also want to remind you of my podcast. Almost every morning, I spend about an hour verbally recording scripture and prayers, and posting those recordings online. Anybody can access them, anywhere in the world. All you need is a computer with an internet connection, or a smart phone. I'm using the *Daily Prayer* edition of the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*, and the new Updated Edition of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. I follow a two-year lectionary cycle; it covers the entire New Testament over the course of one year, and most of the Old Testament over the course of two. The readings are both sequential and seasonal; recently I read through two-thirds of the book of Genesis, a good chunk of the book of Proverbs, and a hefty portion of the Gospel of John. Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Season of Lent, would be a *great* day to begin. I'm not trying to toot my own horn; I'm simply trying to provide a service that I believe will be of spiritual benefit to other people. I know it is that for me. The back of your bulletin tells you where you can find it online.

That's all I want to share with you today. We'll print copies of this meditation so that you can see the list of books I mentioned, and so the people who weren't with us today can see these suggestions as well. We have forty days in the season of Lent, and I really want to encourage you to make the most of them. *Do something spiritual for your soul*. Many of us are exhausted – *emotionally* exhausted, and *spiritually* exhausted. I think we would all benefit from doing *something very intentional* to refresh and renew our souls. Lent is the *perfect* time to do just that – a perfect time to renew your relationship with God – a perfect time to make a new beginning in your spiritual journey.

© 2022 Rev. Bill Pinches