

Before we gather again for Sunday worship we will have entered into the Lenten season. On Tuesday there will be many celebrations/parties before a forty (40) day period of preparation for our celebration of Resurrection Sunday, Easter (now I am not sure if things will really change in New Orleans after Mardi Gras but we like to believe it does!). It will be for some a period of prayer, fasting and reflection. On Wednesday many will have ashes put on their foreheads reminding them of the period of Lent, the sacrifice given—a time of sackcloth and ashes. Sackcloth and ashes are not a symbol of mourning as many think but they are an expression of repentance.

I like Job. I think we too often neglect his story because we are not sure what to do with it. Job experiences days, weeks or maybe months of “spiritual” anguish. He loses his family and his fortune (he was one of the richest men of his day— like Bill Gates). However, in one day he loses it all, wealth, children and prestige in the community, in one day! His response, *“Then Job rose, tore his robes, shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshipped” (1:20)*. Now I can see the tearing of the robes, shaving of head and falling to the ground, but to be honest, I am not sure my next action would be worship.

But he still has his health. At least this is what his accuser in heaven says to the Lord. Why would he not still praise God, he is healthy. As the story continues his health deteriorates and we find Job sitting on the garbage dump/ash heap outside the city. Again the Scriptures tell us, *“Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes” (2:8)*. There his wife tells him to curse God and die (2:9) and his three friends show up and find his condition so tragic that they do not speak for a full week (there may be a lesson for us there—often we speak too much). Job longs for an audience with God – he wants to plead his case. His friends offer no comfort when they do speak and God is silent.

Then God comes. God comes not with answers but with questions. Job replies that he did not fully understand but now he does. God’s ways are not our ways, God’s thoughts not our thoughts, God’s actions not our actions, God’s wisdom not ours – *“...therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (42:6)*.

Jesus has commissioned the seventy and they are being sent out to the cities where Jesus has done most of his miracles: *“Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent” (Matt. 11:20)*. They are to go out in Jesus’ name. They are to enter into the cities and if welcomed enjoy the time and the fellowship and the sharing. And in those cities where they will not be welcomed, and there will be those cities, they are to simply shake the dust off their feet and leave. It will be better for Tyre and Sidon in the coming judgment than for these cities. Why Tyre and Sidon? These were cities the prophets condemned (Isaiah, Jeremiah,

Ezekiel, Amos and Joel). Joel says of them: “*Now what have you against me, O Tyre and Sidon and all the regions of Philistia? Are you repaying me for something I have done? If you are paying me back I will swiftly and speedily return on your own heads what you have done. For you took my silver and my gold and carried off my finest treasures to your temples. You sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks, that you might send them far from their homelands*” (3:4-6).

The prophets proclaimed the destruction of these cities but they had not had the message of the Living Christ preached in their midst. They had not seen the miracles he accomplished. It will be better for these two cities than for those who have seen and heard the proclamation and miracles of the living Christ, harsh judgment for those who refuse the message of love and hope found in Christ.

The question for us today is, are these passages relevant for us in 2009? Do we have a need for repentance—for sackcloth and ashes? We know we hate to admit when we are wrong. We long to find someone to blame our actions on. There are outside influences and one of our favorites is: The devil made me do it. We no longer want to accept responsibility for our own actions. And yet, we and we alone make the final decisions in our actions.

Paul, as he wrote to the congregation in Rome, said in 3:23 “*All of us have sinned and miss the mark of God’s expectations*” (paraphrase). We have failed. Even though God says of Job that he did not sin (2:10) we know that Job was not sinless. God only says of Job that in the matters pertaining to his faith and his faithfulness, he did not sin: “*You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has*” (42:8b). The popular phrase of the day is: “If I had known I was going to live this long, I would have taken better care of myself.” Or, “It is easier to plead for forgiveness than to ask permission.” (I am sure I have heard this last one here and maybe even used it myself a few times!) We often don’t want to admit that we know. Job did, “*My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you*” (42:5). He knew. However, now he has seen the world through God’s eyes – he now knows what He knew.

We have all missed the mark. No matter how close we come we still miss the mark of God’s expectations of us. Now some of you may say, “Oh, no, not me.” I was in a workshop on Saturday with Mark Rambo and he shared with us from a book in which people from outside of the Church were asked to give a one-word description of Christians. The words they used were: intolerant, unforgiving, judgmental, unloving, uncaring, hypocrites and the like. They seldom used positive words to describe how they saw the Church. Now, if this is how we are seen in the world – we have something to repent of. If we are the followers of Christ we profess to be, then our image should be like Christ’s. Most of those interviewed had a positive image of Christ but a negative image of his followers. If we are ambassadors who carry the message of the one who

sent us then our image should be the same as the one who has sent us. An image of a God who loves, redeems, forgives and empowers.

The tradition in many households is to give up something for Lent. I want to give this a new twist for 2009. What are you adding for Lent? Daily Bible readings? Daily prayer time? Sharing a smile with a stranger? Sharing your faith with someone? Something to improve Christ's image in the world? Paul gives us a good start in Romans 12:9ff—from the Message.

*Love from the center of who you are, don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.*

*Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.*

*Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.*

*Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that is not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of that."*

*If your enemy is hungry, feed him: if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.*

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Peterson, Eugene, The Message, Zondervan, 2003