

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

“Mend Your Ways and Obey the Lord”

Jeremiah 26:8-15

The season of Lent is, as we have said, a season of reflection, repentance, and renewal. In short, Lent is a season of reformation.

Now, for most of us, the word “reformation” probably puts us in mind of Martin Luther posting his famous 95 theses on the church door of the University of Wittenberg. But today’s Old Testament lesson reminds us that reformation is not just something that happened long ago and to someone else but rather that it’s something that needs to happen today and it needs to happen to us.

In our Old Testament lesson Jeremiah, a prophet of the Lord, comes to the people of Israel to call for reformation. “Mend (or reform) your ways and your deeds,” he said, “and obey the voice of the Lord your God.” You see, the people had wandered away from the Lord and from His Word. It wasn’t that they had rejected Him out of hand. Rather they had compromised themselves with the world. They were the people of God in name only. And so in His great love for them and not wanting them to perish, God sent Jeremiah to call them back – to reflect on their wandering, to repent of their sin, and to be renewed in His forgiveness. Unfortunately they didn’t take His call to heart. “Surely, we are the people of God and nothing will happen to us,” they said. But something did happen – something called the “Babylonian Captivity”. It wasn’t until fifty years later that the people of Israel were allowed to return home – sadder but wiser.

In the end, the problem wasn’t so much the people’s sin – although sin is always a problem – the problem was their unwillingness to come to grips with their sin. Because they were unwilling to come to grips with their sin they were unable to repent and because they were unable to repent they were unable to be renewed – they were unable to reform. And because they didn’t reform they were bound to suffer the consequences of their sin – separation from God and from one another in captivity. Only after they learned their lesson were they allowed to return to the “Promised Land.”

As it was then, so it often is now. During this season of Lent, God, in His love, calls to His people once again and says, “Mend (or reform) your ways and obey the voice of the Lord your God.” But like the people of Israel many are tempted to respond by saying, “Surely God can’t mean me. He must be talking about someone else.” And because of that, many miss the point of the season altogether. But today we are reminded that God’s not just talking to someone else, He’s talking to you and me. “But I’m not that bad,” we may say. “And beside that I know people who are worse than I am.” Congratulations! Perhaps you do. But, in the end, each of us has to take the Word of the Lord personally or not take it at all.

But if we take His Word personally, what does it say about what needs to be reformed in our lives? Well, the best way to answer that question is not to compare ourselves to someone else’s

standard or even our own but rather to compare ourselves to God's standards in His Word – in short, to compare ourselves to Christ himself who is the only one who ever met the standards God established in His Word.

So how do we compare to Christ? How does what we think and say and do compare to what he thought and said and did as it's recorded in the Bible? How do we measure up? Well, if we're honest with ourselves, we will see and admit how far short we have fallen in comparison. "But I'm not Christ," we may say. "I'm only human." And so we are. But Lent reminds us that because of our baptism into Christ we are made more than just human. We are made to be "little Christs" for that is what the word "Christian" means. But in order to be the little Christs we are made to be, God seeks to make us more like him and less like us until, as St. Paul says, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me." But for that to happen, we need to "die to sin and, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so too we need to live a new life."

It's been said that we are all like Michelangelo's partially completed statues – beautiful but unfinished. In an article entitled, "Giving Up Lent For Lent", the author tells about how he gave up Lent for Lent, at least as it's been traditionally observed. It's too much, she said, too much of a burden, too much giving up this and giving up that, too much to go through. So, she said, she gave up Lent for Lent. Now, instead of the traditional disciplines of Lent, she does other, more enjoyable things. She's much happier, she says, now that she gave up Lent for Lent.

But in simply pursuing happiness she is giving up the blessing of Lent. Lent isn't supposed to be easy. In fact, I would suggest that if properly observed, Lent is probably one of the hardest things a person can go through. Lent is work. It's honest and hard reflection, it's heart-felt and sincere repentance, it's being made new again through the process – it's reformation. But, in the end, God has great blessings in store for those who really go through Lent – blessings called "Easter" blessings – blessings of the assurance of forgiveness and a new life and salvation through the risen Christ.

It's my hope and prayer that each of us gathered here today will "do it right" this Lenten season and that each of us will truly seek to mend our ways and obey the voice of the Lord our God. In Jesus' name. Amen.