

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
March 9, 2011
Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58:1–12
2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

LENT AS INVITATION

For too long, Lent has been characterized as a season that was an invitation to torture more than to discipline. Or, it's been trivialized by our attempts at giving up something but not too much. If I were to ask you—and I don't want you to betray yourselves—but if I were to ask you some of the symbolic sacrifices you've made over the last five years or over the last five Lenten seasons, would they be those earth-shattering kinds of sacrifices that really changed your life? Maybe it's because of the proximity of Lent to the New Year, but sometimes I feel Lent becomes just another opportunity for good resolutions. We didn't keep the one we made on January 1, so now it's time for some sort of renewal.

How many of the sacrifices or disciplines you entered into during Lent involved eating habits? No need to raise your hand. And so, Lent became a time focused on dieting or not focusing on food. Admittedly, during these times it is possible to be more focused on God than we were before simply because we gave something up in order to make a hole in our lives that could be filled with something that pleases God. Lent is an invitation to bring balance back to our lives which are often lived at the extremes of the pendulum: over-committed and under-loved in the way we treat one another. We balance the give and take of life. We balance the generosity and the receiving that is so important in life. The receiving which, no matter what we say, we know is abundant receiving. We balance God's money and our money, and if we are the least attentive, change occurs because of the balance. And rather than seeing money as ours or God's, we change the way we look at money altogether. And that's when Lent takes on new meaning. Not when it's about money, but when we allow God to actually change us.

Self-denial—but don't let it show. What a contrast. What a tension. Jesus says, "Yes, practice the discipline, but don't hide yourself away somewhere else. Put oil on your face and come out in the open. And instead of praying so publicly, pray quietly out of sight. Give of yourself without concern for human approval. Let your right hand not know what your left hand is doing. Imagine if you could get to the point where you could actually offer another person something without thinking about recognition or appreciation.

Does the heart determine where your treasure is? Were you listening closely? As in every other verse in Matthew that we read tonight, Jesus takes the opposite and turns it upside down. He says, no, that's not the way it is. You know the way it is. Your treasure is what determines where your heart is. It's tough to hear this stuff. It's tough to go into Lent recognizing there's nothing we can offer that's worthy without the help of God. Thomas Kempis. He says, "Gather yourself riches that are riches of immorality while you have time." Isn't it odd that we can't contribute to the eternal unless we're in the

Temple. It's now that immortality takes shape. Not in the sweet by-and-by. So Kempis goes on. "Think of nothing but your salvation. Care only for the things of God and make friends by imitating the saints so that when you enter God's happiness the saints will greet you." He says, and I paraphrase just a touch, "Keep yourself a stranger of the affairs of this world."

If there was ever a people that needed to hear this we do. We live too close to the center of much that happens. Keep your heart free and raise it up to God for this is not really your home. Direct your daily prayer—your sighs and your tears—direct them so that they are familiar to your God. If we were to be a little distant from all the pressing needs around us in this region; if we were to follow Kempis' advice just a little and be concerned with a treasure that transcends popular culture, would our lives change? Isaiah really seems to accuse God by saying, "We fast, but you don't even notice. We humble ourselves and you take no heed of us." And again, I blatantly paraphrase, but God says, "Who are you kidding? You wear your hearts on your sleeves. You not only want me to notice, deep down you hope the world notices you too. I see what you're doing. You're more interested in what the world thinks than what I'm thinking. And I think it's time for you to set aside space for you to humble yourself."

What difference does it make if you deny yourself something and you're not interested in helping others? If I may be so familiar, God says, here's the deal, my children. All this abstinence from spending or eating or self-denial, it means nothing if it's not aimed at creating a fresh sense of faith: new hope where there's only been injustice, a hand outstretched to someone who has stumbled, an active rendering, breaking down the barriers that are so prevalent among you—your education barriers and your economic barriers, your barriers of superiority of one region over another. God says that you should expect more from yourself and believe in others more. And when you do fast, find a way to be constructive—a way to share your bread with the hungry, a way to give up something and find a way to give it away to someone else, to share yourself with someone else. And then your light will break through the darkness.

Isaiah says it will be like the dawn overcoming the night. Your needs will be satisfied, and in the process you will be shaken out of the doldrums and depression and sadness of your life. Go back and re-read it. Take the bulletin home. It's all in there. It's so beautiful. And then, to wrap it all up God concludes by saying we should not ever forget, once you get right with me, you have to get right with one another.

Paul said when we work together with God and Christ, we urge you not to accept the grace of God in vain. Maybe that's what it all boils down to. We have all accepted God's grace and to what end? I invite you to continue in prayer—to make an offering of your life; and of the next forty days of Lent: be still and just offer God your openness. Amen.