

# Newsletter Article for February 2024

Dear Friends in Christ:

We begin the month of February in the Season after Epiphany. The Gospel text for each week gives us another glimpse of who and what Jesus is—another facet of the Christ event which begins in Bethlehem and ends on the cross—until the Resurrection bursts forth out of nowhere—or more aptly out of the heart of the Father.

In the middle of the month we shift to the fast before Easter. It is a fast of 40 days not counting Sundays. It is in commemoration of Jesus' choice of suffering and the cross for us. We begin our Lenten journey on Ash Wednesday where we are reminded that our lives as we have lived them lead to death: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Anything after death is not the default for all people. It is not a right which we have by being swell folks. It is a privilege extended to us by the only person ever to have experienced the Resurrection—Jesus of Nazareth. We have earned death, hell, and damnation. Any future other than that is a future won by the holy and precious blood and innocent suffering and death of our Lord, Jesus Christ (Martin Luther). Beginning Ash Wednesday and continuing for the 40 days, we reflect on what it is in us that makes it necessary for Christ to go to the cross. And we repent.

The Aramaic word Jesus would have used for repentance means quite literally to stop, turn around, and go back. For us it means to return to God our Father. I am not happy with the church's lectionary choice for Ash Wednesday having to do with almsgiving and prayer—instructions from the Sermon on the Mount. I use the parable of the Prodigal Son from Luke. That son goes back to his father and is surprised by the grace extended to him. The grace of God is the only thing that can do us any good.

Isaiah 53 gives us the story of Lent in advance: "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." We have demonstrated a profound ability to go astray. There is no going back on our own because we do not even know where back is. When we return, it is not under our own steam, but we allow ourselves to be carried back to the Father by the Good Shepherd. Far from being carried in a passive state, however, we are charged with a particularly difficult task. As we are being carried, it is incumbent on us to stop squirming, stop bleating, and stop trying to get away so that we can return to our own strayness. Our job during Lent is to do nothing that makes Christ's work harder. If that sounds easy to you, it is because you have not tried it.

Resist selfish actions. Resist selfish thoughts. Desist with all attempts to justify your existence and actions. Say no to the temptations of the world and the devil and the sinful flesh. Start praying when you awake, when you eat, and when you lie down to sleep. Do a deep reset of your brain by turning off the devil's own light and sound box (television) and the devil's own cyber connection to your soul (surfing the web). See how many of the behaviors mentioned in Galatians 5:19-21 you can avoid in a 24 hour period and then do it all over again the next day. None of this saves you soul. All of this means that you are working not to make Jesus' work any harder as he saves your soul.

Have a blessed and meaningful Lent.

John Shepherd McKenzie