

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” We have all heard this phrase or some different iteration of it our entire lives. Every Ash Wednesday we have heard it either personally or through some other medium. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. What a heavy phrase. I understand the divine implications of this statement. I understand that it can be seen as from the Creator we came and to the Creator we shall go. I understand that it can bring some ease into our lives. Some wholeness to this journey we are on. However, I also feel as though it places quite a burden on the beginning of our Lenten journey. A burden to set us into action. A burden to make drastic change within our lives. Make change and do it fast! I mean we only have 40 days, so we better get moving. Easter is coming and it’s coming soon!

It’s Paradise or Bust during this time of the year. We have just under two months from the start of Lent to prepare ourselves, to prepare our minds, bodies, and spirits for new life within the Resurrected Christ. Two months! I wonder just how many of us had set a plan at the beginning of the Lenten cycle only to fall short come the end of these 40 days. At some point in our lives, I would wager quite a few of us. I know I’ve done it time and time again. I’m going to not eat chocolate or sweets for this Lent. Or I’m going stop going to bed so late at night. Or even bigger changes, such as, I’m going to stop being so hard on myself, I’m going to stop this addiction that’s been controlling my life, I’m going to be a better spouse, parent, neighbor, friend. Many people use this time of the year to try and change their lives. Try and better their lives for themselves and for the people around them. However, with these goals for change, either large or small, if they don’t come to fruition and we realize that the shame we may feel...can place a heavy weight upon our shoulders. It can set us back further than where we started, or it can even derail our goals all together.

If there is one thing I am trying to stress by all of this, something that I am sure we all know very well yet we still seem to forget it in the moment is that...change is hard... Discerning the correct path in our lives is hard. Holding firm to this path is hard. Living into a new life with Christ can be hard. This is all very hard work. Not to mention we are trying to engage with this during a pandemic, with political and social conflicts close to boiling over, and half of the country seems to be freezing inside their homes. Change is hard!

And yet, with all of this being said, I almost laugh when I read through the scripture verses for today. I know, I’m sure that was not where you thought I was going to go with that. However, when I was studying the Gospel according to Mark in school, I always imagined this as the secret pamphlet Gospel. The Gospel according to Mark is the shortest of the Gospels in the Bible and, as in the scripture for today, it sometimes tends to fly by some of these essential struggle periods in the life of Jesus. In all of two sentences, Mark described 40 days of struggle, temptation, and discernment by Jesus. We go almost straight from Jesus being declared God’s son to him going off to begin his ministry to change the world. If only it was that easy to change our lives around!

It seems that even in Mark’s time the general attitude was Paradise or Bust. Forget the struggles, forget the journey, show us that which was promised! Let’s get to the juicy parts of the story. Let’s reap the rewards before we’ve even put in the work. However, even though this Gospel tends to fly through some of these pivotal moments in the life of Jesus, I believe we can still glean some helpful advice for when we are going through our own changes and discernment in our lives. Though it is short, we can see and feel the Spirit emanating through each line within

these verses. Illuminating the bigger picture within and showing us that through each moment of our journey, whether we are just beginning, in the midst of discernment, or setting off on the path, the Spirit is always with us.

What do we look at first within this text? How do we begin this process of discernment? How do we get started?? You may be asking all of these questions, or just waiting for me to get to my point. However, the first thing we should do before embarking on our journey for change, before we set our sights on eternal life...we pause. We simply pause. In our fast-paced world this is counter cultural. It feels strange to find time to be and to look deeply within ourselves. To hold off on changes in our lives until our bodies, minds, and souls are prepared for what that change entails. Yet when we are preparing to embark on a journey to live out God's call for us, when we are preparing to be the agents that bring about the Realm of God into this world, we must be prepared for the immensity of this task.

We see this in the scriptures for today. Even Jesus, after being named the Son of God and receiving the Holy Spirit for all to see, did not begin his ministry straight away. Before he set out, the Spirit entered into his life and brought him through a period of discernment. A time where he had to fully prepare himself for what lay ahead. I believe it is vital for us to do the same. Change can be hard, change can be necessary, change can be absolutely vital in order to make a new life in Christ a reality however, if we don't allow the time for the Spirit to work within us, if we don't allow ourselves the time to truly engage with our hearts and souls, then change can be near impossible.

So we pause, we pause and we take the time Jesus once took. We take the time to wrestle with our doubts, push back against temptations. We pause and let the Spirit work.

Now, you may be asking yourselves, what does any of this have to do with Lent? Lent is the time when we take action. Lent is when we give something up or fast or take on a new thought or plan. That's what Jesus did, right? While its true, during this time in the wilderness, Jesus did fast. I appreciate the telling of this time from the Gospel according to Mark because that isn't the main point. We aren't focusing on the actions took by Jesus during this time. We are focusing on the timeline in which Jesus took. What I am proposing for this Lenten season, is that we don't take direct action that we plan to end come Easter. This Lenten season is a time for discernment. A time to seek within ourselves the place in which the Spirit has fallen upon us. To allow the Spirit to fill every part of our souls. Easter isn't our ending point, isn't the reprieve from our fast, it isn't Paradise achieved. It is the launching off point for when our ministry begins.

Does this sound like a lot? I admit, it is a lot. Changing the world is daunting. Changing our own lives is daunting. However, one of the most powerful points of this scripture today is that it shows us that Jesus went through the exact same experience. The spirit of Christ with Us knows the struggle before starting this journey. Knows that we cannot go through this alone. Jesus even had angels waiting on him throughout this process. When we begin this process of discernment, know that Christ is always with us, holding us up when we falter, steadying the ground beneath our feet, and shining a light along the path.

Now, I know that after worship today, the Open and Affirming committee is beginning a series concerning Justice in our world and creating a just world for all. Much like our Paradise or Bust attitude, the desire to jump past the journey and jump past justice straight to peace is strong. It is particularly strong for those of us who hold privilege in this world and haven't experienced the brutal underbelly of injustice. I've often struggled with this. How do we engage with justice? Is peace even possible? Where is my role in the path of justice? It is a journey fraught with heartache, deconstruction of one's self, pain and sometimes despair. It is also the same journey Jesus began when he was named God's child and the Spirit fell upon him. It is THE journey we must take if we ever hope for the Realm of God to become a reality in this world. So, I encourage all that are about to join the ONA committee to take a pause, dive deep within yourself and allow for that dove to descend upon you. And know this, it is from ashes that we came and to ashes we shall go, yet remember you are loved every moment in between.