

Date Preached	02-Mar-2022	Date Initiated	22-Feb-2022
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Ash Wed (All Yrs)

" We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. "



One of the most stimulating and challenging courses I took in seminary I actually took somewhere else. To satisfy a distribution requirement, I enrolled in a Bible class at a Reformed seminary in northern Virginia to study the last third of the New Testament: the Letter to the Hebrews through the Revelation to St John. And while I learned *a lot* of Bible in this class, at least equally instructive for me, as a visitor, were the class discussions. Reformed theology—sometimes short-handed to "Calvinism"—tends to emphasize humanity's total sinfulness (or "depravity"); it holds that we are elected to salvation individually, so it looks for ways to know we've *been* elected ... and to avoid being *un*-elected.<sup>1</sup> No matter which book or what doctrine we were studying in class, sin and sinfulness loomed large.

It could be argued, on the other hand, that we Episcopalians and Anglicans don't wrestle *enough* with sin and sinfulness. My own Christian journey is a good example: I blithely whistled my way through decades of faith in Jesus, confident that my sins had been forgiven and that I'd been promised eternal life. Yes, I knew I could—and *should*—be a better person ... to treat people more kindly; to be more generous. But Jesus had already 'taken care of' all that sin-stuff, right? Each year, Ash Wednesday would roll around, Lent would begin again ... and, privately, I'd wonder what the real point was. Jesus sacrificed Himself on the Cross for our justification—for the forgiveness of all our sins, forever. Why did we need to spend a month-and-a-half every year poking at our own sinfulness?

The Lenten tradition, however, is ancient, and the Church's most ancient practices usually reflect a wealth of spiritual and theological wisdom.<sup>2</sup> In time (and by God's grace), I was brought to understand that Lent's annual call for us to consider our own sinfulness is neither contrary nor superfluous to the assured salvation Jesus bequeaths us in the font of Baptism. "Not contrary" because nothing we do in our earthly lives—no quantum or degree of sin—can ever separate us from the infinite love of God, in Jesus Christ. But also, "not superfluous": For our knowledge that Jesus has procured our salvation is not the *terminus* of our lifelong relationship with Him but, rather, its *starting point*.

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The complete and astonishing sacrifice Christ made upon the Cross literally flooded this world with God's grace: It is *everywhere*, in *everything* and *everybody*. To be human is, *perforce*, to

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<sup>1</sup> This ridiculously short summary does not do service to classical Reformed theology (this was an Orthodox Presbyterian seminary), but it will suffice for purposes of this sermon.

<sup>2</sup> This sermon is not the venue in which to discuss the origins of Lent, but we do think it began as a final and intensive period of repentance, instruction, prayer and service for (adult) catechumens during the final weeks leading up to their Baptism at the Great Vigil of Easter. (Traditionally, the Vigil the foremost occasion for Baptism of the entire liturgical year, although Pentecost and the Epiphany were alternatives, as well.)

exist entirely in the unlimited and wholly unmerited grace—goodness, love, mercy, care, empathy, kindness and concern—of God, full stop. The problem, however, is that we so often screen or obscure this all-over grace from our view. ¶God endows humanity with free will in the hope that we will bend and shape ourselves in a more and more Godward direction ... but we, instead, resolutely wrench ourselves ever more *selfward*. ¶God gives us powers of knowledge and innovation so that we may all care and provide for one another ... but, overwhelmingly, we deploy these powers to preserve our own status and increase our own comfort. ¶God blesses us with self-awareness and individuality so that we may contribute our voice to the great song of creation ... but how often we pervert these blessings by insisting upon our own key and our own tempo.

This selfwardness ... this bending of our beings so disproportionately toward our own ends; our own satisfaction ... is the sinfulness Lent compels us to heed. ¶Lent calls us to name the shackles of our egocentrism and self-prioritization ... because then we can cast them off—and sense God's grace coursing through us in the liberating and ennobling way God intends it to. ¶Lent calls us to turn our life's perspective away from the cramped, consumeristic slog of this world—acquisitive and self-protective—and toward the horizon-less promise of our eternal life in Christ ... because then we become conduits of His grace for one another and for all. ¶Lent calls us to speak the myths and deceptions we cling to, in order to paper over all the uglinesses of existence ... because then we commit ourselves to the Truth that is Jesus—and become a force that reveals to the whole world the divine grace that inhabits its every atom. This, then, is not just the point but, indeed, the *hope*—the *divine, sacred* hope—of Lent: that we use these six weeks to disabuse ourselves of some—a few—even *one*—of the barriers we consistently erect between us and Christ's grace ... that we consciously weaken our wall of selfwardness and allow the flow of grace that ensues to carry us ever more Godward.

To do this, however, we need to examine our lives and repent. We need to pray and read and meditate on God's holy word. We need to put down some of those things that surfeit our self-satisfaction and take up something that opens a new channel to God. In a word, we need to be *holy*.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, over the next several weeks, in our Sunday Eucharists, we'll be reflecting upon the various ways we sin ... the ways that our personal cult of 'self' clouds our vision and impedes our grasp of the grace that surrounds us. Employing the wording of the General Confession we say each week (*BCP*, p 360), we will explore how our thoughts and words and deeds ... as well as that which we leave *un-thought*, *un-spoken* and *un-done* ... keep us from the fullness and depth of relationship that Jesus yearns for with us ... that His salvation has procured for us ... if we will but turn our hearts to Him, again, and be reconciled.



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<sup>3</sup> Cf the *Invitation to a Holy Lent*, *BCP*, p 265.