

1St. David's Presbyterian Church
13 March 2011, 11 a.m. Service
First Sunday in Lent

Self-denial: To What End?

The churches in which I grew up - in Rotterdam and in Edmonton - did not observe the church season of Lent. In part that was because, during the Reformation, the Dutch Protestant churches rejected the Lent rituals with their emphasis on self-denial as a means of finding favour with God and perhaps quicker entrance into heaven. In part they also did so because of the frivolity of carnival on the days prior to Ash Wednesday - the first day of Lent. While the word carnival - meant the last opportunity to eat meat [carne] before the commencement of Lent, the festivities often degenerated into what the staid burghers of the Netherlands considered highly sinful behaviour. Interestingly however, the Dutch did keep the word - Lente, which means Spring. So, this season, marked with the riotous colours of crocuses, hyacinths, tulips, and daffodils was a colourful, cheerful one.

By the 1950s and into the 1960s, many Protestant churches in North America would have taught that the idea of penitence and self-denial should not be a part only of Lent but of every worship service and private devotions. Most Christians would have identified profoundly with Psalm 51. When we read David's poetic prayer earlier, did you notice how many times he referred to his sins? The poem contains 7 mentions of sin, three transgressions, two iniquities, and one bloodguilt. The latter, the bloodguilt, was the most serious in that it clearly violated one, if not the last four, of the Ten Commandments. David had committed murder by arranging for the killing of Uriah, the husband of Bathseba with whom he had an adulterous affair. He had lied to Uriah and had coveted his wife. These were sins against God and his law. David knew that, even before the prophet Nathan confronted him with the sin. "Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."

While the vast majority of Christians in the mid-twentieth century would not have been guilty of murder and adultery, they would have viewed Psalm 51 as their personal prayer for the sins that they believed they had committed, hourly, daily, weekly. Thus, on Sundays, they expected the preacher to speak about sin, and about the need for constant self-examination and repentance. They also would have approved of limits to their behaviour as well as self-denial, but they would have expected contrition to be a year-round daily activity and not limited to Lent or Fridays. No matter what denominational flavour, most would have understood clearly Isaiah's message concerning fasting.

Isaiah wrote his prophecies, his poems, his warnings in a turbulent time. The rapidly expanding Syrian empire threatened to overrun Israel. In fact, Isaiah predicted the fall of Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem.

By Isaiah's time, the people were no longer living the life and society that Jehovah had outlined for them when they first entered Canaan. They were to be a theocracy, a society ruled by the Word of God through divinely chosen men and women. All the people were equals economically and socially. The land ultimately belonged to God and had to be returned to Him every 50 years - the year of Jubilee. In actual practice, this meant that the land was to be returned to the tribe and family who had received it originally. So the value of land declined the closer the year of Jubilee. So every 50 years, everyone would again be economically and socially equals. Meanwhile, laws and traditions compelled the rich to maintain those in need.

In our reading, Isaiah sarcastically points to the erosion and decay of Hebrew society. While the people kept the rituals of their religion, injustice prevailed; while they fasted once a year on the Day of Atonement, as prescribed in Leviticus, some kept fellow Israelites in slavery. Society had become violent, rulers were making unrighteous laws that benefited the rich and robbed the poor, the widows, and orphans. "Woe to those who make unjust laws," Isaiah exclaims in Chapter 10, "to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless."

The disintegration of Israel had gone so far that its citizens no longer recognised the injustice and unrighteousness in their society and they whined that God had forsaken them even though they worshipped him. "Why have we fasted," they cried out, "and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?"

Isaiah's reply is clear. Fasting without righteous actions, worshiping while acting unjustly is offensive to God. But what about self-denial for its own sake, say during Lent?

Some years ago, when Dini and I were touring Crete, we visited the Gouvernetos Monastery on the north coast near Chania. From Gouvernetos we walked down a stone path for about 15 to 20 minutes and 120 steps further to the monastery's Katholikon, or church, which was partly carved into the rocks. Located at the bottom of a deep bowl like valley, the Katholikon was surrounded by natural and man-made caves in the steep valley walls. Here ascetics had spent their entire days in meditation and prayer, dependent for survival mainly on the Gouvernetos Monastery at the top of the valley. While we picnicked on a small plateau overlooking the Katholikon and the caves, we wondered what was the purpose of a life lived only in meditation, prayer, and worship? While we admired their piety, their love of God, their self-denial and deprivation, did the ascetic lifestyle please God?

My thoughts went to Francis of Assisi, who spurned civilization and a life of luxury and pleasure to live in a cave. For a number of years, he emerged infrequently and survived only because caring friends placed food at the entrance to his cave. But eventually, Francis abandoned the cave and commenced his work among the poor. He founded a monastic order that still lasts today.

Of course, there is also the example of Jesus, who spent 40 days in the wilderness. As an aside, those 40 days became the major inspiration for the 40 weekdays of Lent. Sundays are not

counted. Christ's sojourn had a purpose. By living alone off the land, Jesus gathered strength for the temptations that lay ahead. Even though he was divine, his human body and mind suffered the hardships of the desert, constant hunger, and thirst. Afterwards, the devil's temptation was real. Failure to pass the test was a possibility; otherwise it would not have been temptation. Most importantly, the forty days in the wilderness prepared Jesus for the constant pressure he would face in the coming years, the sick and blind who needed healing; the spiritually destitute who required restoration of their faith; the outcasts of society who desired empowerment.

To be fair, I don't know if the recluses of Gouvernetos spent their entire lives in the caves or if they like Christ and St Francis of Assisi eventually went into the world to bring healing to the sick, food to the hungry, and freedom to the repressed. Fortunately, I do not have to make the final judgment. Yet, it seems to me that self-denial, be it through a lengthy period of fasting, or merely abstaining from alcohol, or foregoing a daily tablet of chocolate during Lent without some change or action - be it spiritual growth or renewal, greater awareness of injustices in society - is pointless.

To return to the church family that nurtured me in my faith, their worship may have seemed to me in retrospect to have been unnecessarily restrictive, obsessed with too many don'ts. Yet its members had a profound faith in the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ and a strong belief that his teachings had to be central to all of life. Within a few years, these immigrants - most of who arrived in Edmonton penniless - built four churches, an entire Christian school system, helped lay the foundation for a Christian University College, supported a Christian labour movement and several national social justice organizations. Their piety had tangible results.

I must confess that at the time, the 'don't do this, don't do that' seemed somewhat oppressive to some of us younger folks and we worked to make worship more lively and joyful. In particular, I remember an event in the winter of 1971 and 1972, just before we came to St. John's and joined St. David's.

In the fall, I had been elected an elder. It so happened that at the time, the denomination was in the process of approving a new liturgy for baptism. Whereas the old form tended to be rather negative in tone with a heavy emphasis on sin and judgment, the new liturgy approached baptism from a more positive perspective emphasizing the joy of bringing a child into the church community and of God's covenantal redeeming love which, by the way is also very evident in Psalm 51 and Isaiah 58.

In any case, one of the changes in the new liturgy was the omission of the phrase "conceived and born in sin." This phrase was in fact a popular expression of the theological concept of original sin. In Psalm 51, David expressed it as "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." The concept of original sin is also implied in that difficult passage from Romans that Amy read. The sin of Adam and Eve reappears in every human being at the time of conception. No one is immune.

The older elders in the consistory [our session], possessed extensive theological knowledge and loved to debate church doctrine. They wanted to retain the old form and

especially its reference to the concept of original sin. A number of the younger, totally immature, less knowledgeable, and totally bereft of elder experience argued rather loosely that conception itself could not be sinful. The debate continued over several meetings and the chair wisely avoided a vote.

It so happened that on January 4, Dini gave birth to our Michael, all 10 pounds and 13 ounces. Normally, he would have been baptized on his first or second Sunday. But we wanted the minister to use the new liturgy. At the next consistory meeting, the minister closed the debate by warning us that if we did not decide soon, Michael would crawl up to the font on his own. The council approved the new form without any further debate.

As I explained earlier to the Sunday school children, the colour of Lent and Easter is purple. On the one hand it is the colour of royalty and so it reminds us of Christ the King, his suffering and death and helps us to look forward to his victory over the grave that we will celebrate on the happiest of all Sundays. At the same time, purple symbolizes fallen humanity that needs redemption. While our scripture passages point to our sinful nature and God's judgment, they also emphatically speak of the salvation he offers through Christ. It is a total package. And it calls us to action. In an age, where the concept of sin has been moved into the background, a dramatic or small amount of self-denial during Lent is worth doing if it leads to a deeper understanding of our broken humanity and the Gospel, to spiritual renewal, or to a renewed commitment to social action.