

"MAKING LIFE BETTER"
February 17, 1991

TEXT: Mark 1:15 ". . . 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.'"

As many of you know, especially if you have read your Congregationalist, this is the first Sunday in Lent. Not the most popular season of the year, but important just the same. From the Fourth Century on --and maybe even before that-- Christians have celebrated Lent as a time for self-examination in preparation for Easter.

No doubt, there have been times when Lent was observed in a very legalistic fashion, and our spiritual ancestors quite rightly rejected many of those old practices. But Lent can still serve a very useful purpose. For no spiritual progress ever takes place without some kind of inner struggle. And that is what Lent is all about.

How long that struggle lasts can vary from one person to another, but it usually takes a while. And, in the language of the Bible, that "while" is often expressed by the symbolic number, forty. So we read that Moses was on the mountain of the Lord for forty days and forty nights before God gave him the Ten Commandments. We find Elijah fasting forty days and forty nights on Mount Horeb before God revealed Himself to him. We see the children of Israel wandering for forty years in the wilderness before they were allowed to enter the Promised Land. And even Jesus, after his baptism in the river Jordan, spent forty days and forty nights wrestling with temptations.

Now, if spiritual giants like Moses and Elijah needed times of preparation before they could experience God's presence, why should we think that we are any different? And, if even Jesus needed to get away from the pressures and distractions of life in order to think through his priorities, does it not stand to reason that you and I might need to do the same? So the church sets aside these forty days before Easter, not counting Sundays, as a time for self-examination and spiritual renewal.

I am told that, in the old days, the Indians of Michigan's Upper Peninsula used to set fire to the forests near their homes. And for good reason. By burning away the underbrush and the smaller trees, they encouraged the growth of wild berries which made up a large part of their food supply. Freed from competition from the weeds and released from the shade cast by the trees, those berries grew more quickly and could be harvested more easily.

In a way, Lent is like that. It comes as a time for us to burn away all those behaviors and attitudes that threaten to overgrow our faith. And that, in turn, encourages new spiritual growth. And who of us can say that our lives have not become overgrown with habits and activities that sometimes get in the way of our spiritual lives?

By that I do not necessarily mean any big or notorious sins. Most of us manage to avoid those. But little things which keep getting in the way of our spiritual growth. Those seemingly innocent distractions and endless interruptions that can crowd Christ right out of our lives. Lent, then, is a time for getting back to basics, for burning away the weeds, not because they are so terrible in themselves, but in order to make life better.

I am convinced that is what Jesus meant in this morning's scripture when he said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:15) He must have thought that was important because it was the basis of his very first sermon. Unfortunately many of us do not seem to pay very much attention.

I think that is because the word, "repent" keeps getting in our way. It is a word that sounds strangely out of place in polite society. I suspect that, when we hear it, many of us imagine a strange little man walking up and down the street in a white robe and carrying a sign that says, "The end of the world is at hand." No wonder we do not take it very seriously.

But that is not what repentance means at all. Both in Latin and in Greek, the word simply means "rethink" something. As Gerald Kennedy writes, "Repentance means to look backward and find out where we went wrong and what we have dismissed that must be accepted. It means to take a long look forward, and to choose new values and a new master."

Repentance does not mean thinking of oneself as some kind of terrible sinner. It simply means rethinking the way we look at life; taking God's point of view instead of our own. And the purpose of repentance is not to make us feel guilty or to take away the things that give us pleasure, but to make our lives even better than they are now.

In the Bible the best example of repentance is almost certainly Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. As most of you know, it deals with a young man who one day says to his father, "Father, give me the share of property that falls to me." And, when he got the money, he packed up his things and went off into a far country where he soon spent everything he had.

Then, when his money was gone, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he looked around for a job, but the only thing he could find was a job feeding swine. Now that might not seem so bad to some of us, but it was the worst possible job for a Jew because they consider swine to be

unclean. Besides, the job did not pay very much, and apparently it did not include meals because we are told that "he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything."

In spite of everything, however, the job did have one big advantage. It gave him time to think. And one day, while he was thinking about the mess he was in, it dawned on him that back home even the hired servants had a good place to sleep and plenty to eat. So he said to himself, "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'"

In discussing this parable, the great German theologian Helmut Theilicke writes, "The repentance of the lost son is . . . above all homesickness; not just turning away from something; but turning back home." And then he adds, "Whenever the New Testament speaks of repentance, always the great joy is in the background. It does not say, 'Repent or hell will swallow you up,' but 'Repent, the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.'"

Now I realize that most of us have not hit bottom like the young man in Jesus' story. Most of us lead pretty good lives. We have much to be grateful for. But Lent is a way of saying that life can be even better. Do you remember what happened to that Prodigal Son when he did get home. His father made him the guest of honor at a big banquet. Instead of going hungry or eating the things the pigs ate, he had more than enough of everything.

There are those here this morning who already have everything they want when it comes to things. But how many of us have all the strength we want, all the courage we need, all the understanding we crave? Who of us does not have moments when life seems to be coming apart at the seams and we wonder how we can cope with even one more stress?

When Jesus says, "Rethink your life, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand" he is not so much asking us to give something up as urging us to make room for something wonderful. He is inviting us to come to ourselves and come back to our father so that we, too, can join the party. It is his way of making life even better. Let us pray that during this season of Lent we do not waste that opportunity.