

ASH WEDNESDAY SERVICE, March 2, 2022:

PSALM 51

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

This is the first official day of Lent which is a 40-day period between now and Easter, excluding Sundays. Many Christians from all over the world observe Lent. It's a time of reflection and exploration of our faith. We ask questions like, "Why do we follow Jesus? What does Jesus require of me? How can I serve Jesus better?"

A lot of Christians observe the season by giving up something. Usually, it's something that the person enjoys like coffee or chocolate or television. I'm okay with that. I usually take something on rather than give something up. Last year, my Lenten discipline was reading at least three books about anti-racism. The year before, I took on the discipline of growing vegetables. The point of Lenten season is to develop a closer relationship with God. Different faith traditions use different tools to accomplish this. I'm partial to Celtic church traditions.

The Celtic Cross is probably the most recognizable symbol in Celtic Christianity. You can find these ancient stone crosses all over the Scottish and Irish countryside. The Celtic cross unites the two touchstones of Celtic spirituality: creation and salvation. The circle represents God the creator and the cross is the symbol of our salvation. The Celts saw no separation between the sacred and the secular. Because of this, they worked out a "spirituality of *engagement*" with the world, rather than *disengagement*.

I thought I'd share a few aspects of Celtic Christianity today that might help you discover some ways that you can observe Lent this year.

1. The Celts have a strong conviction that the Earth is Alive with the Presence and Glory of God. The Celts were all about nature and affirmed by the first words of Psalm 19: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims (God's) handiwork." Because God's Spirit dwells in all living things, everything is inherently good. Every moment, every location had the potential of becoming a time and place for encountering God, or as they called it, "Thin places." During Lent, maybe you can plant a flower and take time every day to observe the changes taking place in the plant ... both the ones you could see and the ones you can't. Nurturing a plant's growth is a way of giving God thanks for the gift of life.

2. The Celts believed in girding oneself with "the armor of God." The Celts believed that God's good creation had been corrupted by evil. They saw this evil as an invading army that had to be driven out. In Ephesians 6:11 St. Paul tells the church to, "put on the whole armor of God." So through prayer the Celts 'bound' to themselves spiritual breastplates, called Loricas, to reassure them of divine protection. With the right arm outstretched they would turn sunward making a full circle as they recited St. Patrick's famous prayer:

"Christ be with me, Christ within me Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger."

In this turbulent world, it's not hard to see how evil corrupts creation. So as you face each day, remember St. Patrick's prayer or maybe write one of your own. Know that you are sheltered by divine love and grace. As you face any challenge or crisis, remind yourself that Christ is with you and within you, and that nothing can separate you from God's love.

3. The Celts believed that because we are created in the image of God, we can be restored to our original goodness. This is at the heart of their understanding of salvation. What had been covered needs to be uncovered. What had been lost needs to be found. This finding and uncovering was the work of Jesus, who came to banish evil and restore

creation's goodness. God's Spirit was fully present in Jesus, and the gracefulness of his life, makes our restoration possible. As Jesus healed the sick and forgave those who had sinned, he restored the divine image in us. Once again, we can all live as God's sons and daughters. Knowing that they were God's sons and daughters and were given the grace to live that way, the Celts understood their goal was to become more and more like Jesus in their own life and work.

For this Lenten season, think of yourself as being created in the image of God. How does it feel to know that you too are God's beloved child and that God's spirit is within you? Consider what may be covering up that image and choking that Spirit in your life. What needs to happen to uncover and revive this in you?

4. The Celts believed that all life is intertwined. The most prevalent Celtic symbol is the Celtic knot. It's found on their crosses, jewelry, tattoos and on manuscripts. It symbolizes how all things in heaven and earth are intricately intertwined and inseparable. They believed that the relationship of the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - is the prime illustration of interconnection. Life in this world is intertwined with life in the world beyond this one. The communion of the saints was a vibrant reality for the Celts, who believed that those who died remained present to them. Only a thin barrier separates those living on earth and those living in heaven. This was especially true of the risen Christ, whom the Celts believed is not only at God's right hand but also at ours. Even though God can be encountered anywhere, there are also certain 'thin places' like Iona, Scotland where this happens most easily.

For Lent, ask yourself, "Is there a thin place in your life where God is particularly present to you?" If so, visit or plan to visit that special place in your home or work that can be this for you. Go there from time to time to experience intimacy with God.

PRAYER -

All glory and honor are yours everywhere and always, O God, for in your kindness and mercy, your patience and faithfulness, you are always ready to forgive and not punish. We give you thanks and praise for your Son, our savior and brother, Jesus Christ, by whose example and strength we resist all evil, and turn our backs on its lures of comfort and honor, of power and success, seeking instead to store up treasure in heaven, knowing that though we may seem to have nothing, in purity, knowledge, patience and kindness, we really possess everything.

Therefore with our hearts lifted high, we offer you thanks and praise at all times through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS (Jesse):

The Lord your God is kind and full of mercy, always ready to forgive and not punish. Christ, by uniting with us and sharing in our sin, has enabled us to share in the righteousness of God. Sisters and Brothers, our sins are forgiven; be at peace.

Forgive those things we have done which have caused you sadness, and those things we should have done that would have brought you joy. In both we have failed ourselves, and you. Bring us back to that place where our journey began, when we said that we would follow your path. Lead us to the Cross and meet us there.

DISTRIBUTION OF ASHES:

BENEDICTION:

Lord, grant us simplicity of faith and a generosity of service that gives without counting cost. A life overflowing with Grace poured out from the One who gave everything, that we might show the power of love to a broken world and share the truth from a living Word. Lord, grant us simplicity of faith, and a yearning to share it.