

26 February 2023: The Last Sunday after The Epiphany—Matthew 17:1-9

Most major-city freeways have “express lanes.” Flying low in the express lanes! Residents even pay extra so they can reach their destination two minutes sooner.

We want everything in a hurry: express oil change, express lunch, mail, tax preparation, pharmacy. As soon as we get some where we scurry on. We are in a rush, even in Church. I know the worst thing I can do is preach too long: fifteen minutes is intolerable, ten minutes acceptable, five minutes better. Many think more than one hour a week—out of 126 waking hours—is an unbearable burden.

Hurry, hurry, hurry is our pace. Deluded by self-importance, we are impatient with slow traffic, affronted by other’s slowness, consider delays as personal injury; we make ourselves miserable by refusing to accept life on anyone’s terms but our own. Perpetual rushing, hustle, impatience are signs of spiritual immaturity, indications that life, others, and ultimately God are only valuable if serving one’s own immediate purposes. Today stop. Quiet your mind and spirit, your body, your life. Can you stop hustling toward your own goals and desires and wait for God’s goals and desires?

I think this is why Jesus ordered them: *Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.* God’s purpose was deeper, broader, higher than what *they* could tell about what *they* had seen. They must let God’s purpose unfold, in which they had a significant but small role.

Lent, which begins this Wednesday, is our invitation to get off the express lane. If we bring our typical rushing fury to Lent, we miss the point. We take up the tools of penance, self-denial, and more or new spiritual practices to make real the desire for amending our lives. Penance is therapeutic: it is what happens *after* we acknowledge our sins and receive God’s forgiveness; it is our response, our pledge-in-action to pattern our lives after God’s wisdom and ways and not our own; the training of our bodies, minds, and souls to receive yet more fully God’s healing grace *from now on*. Penance is not the *requirement* for forgiveness it is the *result* of receiving God’s forgiveness.

To be penitent is to stop doing what brings sin, pain, and death into one’s life—and others’ lives—and to practice the thoughts, words and actions that break the old patterns of living. Penance undoes the power of the past and looks forward with hope to the new way of living in and for Christ. This is crucially important: penance is not fixation on the past but the foundation of the future. As the Seventh Century spiritual master, John Climacus, wrote: *Repentance is a contract with God for a second life.*

Penance means both letting go of old, destructive thoughts and behaviors, and taking up positive, purgative thoughts and behaviors. Therefore, Lent involves abstinence and action: leaving behind what keeps us from living in and for Christ and doing what draws us closer to living in and for Christ. Amendment of life has no express lane. Amendment is God’s ways and wisdom lived day-by-day in every relationship and environment. Living God desires for us and others, made real in the rough and tumble of everyday life, takes time.

Some practical advice: pray for guidance. God is calling you to some abstinence and some action in Lent. As for abstinence what are you sick and tired of: what compulsive thinking, speaking, or acting is toxic to your life in Christ? To what new or neglected action is God calling you? Do not hurry to conclusions. Pray fervently; listen with the ear of your heart. It is always helpful to seek out a soul friend, someone whose judgment you trust and receive God’s wisdom through her or him.

Next, press on when you stumble or fail. Compulsive haste allows us to avoid what is challenging and difficult. Spiritual maturity takes the long view, is patient especially with oneself. The spiritually mature trust God more than their own fleeting moods or need for control and instant comfort.

Last, let go of rushing haste in worship. To that end prepare yourself with mind-full intentionality and with deep prayer before worship. There is a pamphlet in the Narthex to assist you. During worship, there is a word, a thought, a sight that God will give you every minute, if you patiently prepare to receive it.

Express Christianity is impossible. Quiet your outward and inward turbulence so God may patiently work in and through you, “...that (you)...may be...changed into his likeness from glory to glory...”

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.