

3-2-22 Ash Wednesday: The Crucial Hours. Pastor Prieue

Luke 22:31,32. **As Satan Sifts, Jesus Confronts, Forgives, and Strengthens**

Lent is not the most wonderful time of year. There's no Christmas trees and lights and carols. We even put the Church's most jubilant songs, the Alleluia's and Gloria's away for the season. Instead, there's purple and black, there's minor keys and haunting lyrics, and there's time to face a somber reality. Lent may not be the most wonderful time of year, but it is a crucial time of year. It's crucial in two different ways.

In its etymological sense, the word crucial comes from the Latin word *Crux*, which means cross. Lent is crucial because it points us to the cross where we see Life and Light offer himself up to death and darkness. In another sense of the word, Lent is crucial, critical, vital, because it sticks a finger in my chest like the prophet Nathan sent to David and says, "You are the man!" so that I realize it's me. I'm the reason he's up there. And it's you, you're the reason the Lord of life died and slow and painful death.

Lent simply will not let either of us escape, if we only stop for a moment and listen. The rest of the year we become supremely capable of occupying ourselves, distracting ourselves, keeping ourselves so busy we don't have spare moment to stop and look in the mirror. And isn't that part of why we stay so busy, because we can't stand to be alone with ourselves in the silence. But Lent won't let us run and hide. The eternal echo of God's soul-searching question, "**Where are you?**" thunders throughout the ruined garden. We must present ourselves to face the music. Lent demands that time of us. It puts strange words on our lips. "I bow my head by sin distressed, with deep and painful guilt oppressed, the cross of Christ my only plea—O God, be merciful to me." (CW 982, *With Broken Heart and Contrite Sight*).

Today, draped in somber purple and black, we meditate on one of those Crucial Hours that Lent holds before our eyes, an hour of confrontation, an hour of failure, and an hour of restoration. Jesus boils down the hour to but a minute as he warns his disciples and especially the one who thought he was the strongest, with the words of our sermon text, "**Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, so that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.**" (Luke 22:31,32).

What Jesus packs into but a few sentences, we must unravel with a series of questions, the first of which is this. 1. Who is Satan the sifter? And our answer comes from Jesus's words to the pharisees on another occasion. "**[The devil] was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language for he is a liar and the father of lies.**" John 8:43

In short, he is the Enemy, the Adversary, the one who first turned mankind back to dust. Satan is the Murderer, the Ancient Serpent who leads the whole world astray. And he's also the Accuser, who "**accuses our brothers and sisters before our God day and night.**" (Rev 12:9) He's the reason we must gather for lent and Ash Wednesday: to remember the dust that we are and will return to because we listened to his lies.

That brings us to our next question. 2: If Jesus knows who Satan is and how deceptive, how powerful he is, why does he allow Satan to do the sifting? Did you catch what Jesus said to Peter, "Simon, Simon, Satan has *asked* to sift you?" He needs permission. As powerful of an enemy as he is, he's a wild dog a leash and God is the one who says to him, "This far and no farther!" But that means that ultimately Jesus does grant permission to Satan to do his sifting.

There's another time we see God grant that kind of permission to Satan. In Job chapter 1 and 2, "the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them." Then Satan set his sights on Job and after slinging his accusations at both God and Job, God granted permission. "The LORD said to Satan, **"Very well, then everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."** And later, he lets the leash out one step further, **"he is in your hands; but you must spare his life."** (1:12, 2:6).

Why does God play this game? Why does he let Satan take everything Job had, including his wealth and his children. Why did God allow Peter and the disciples to face the trials of the night Jesus was betrayed? And why does God allow straw after straw to break your back? More trips to the doctor? More bills on the table? Another death in the family? More variants? More wars? Enough is enough! It seems he's just out for blood. Why does God give the devil permission to sift us so violently?

The image of sifting wheat is one of those Bible images that may be lost on us completely if you're not a farmer or you don't have clue how the wheat in the field turns into your Wonderbread. After the wheat is harvested, it must be threshed, that is pounded or run over with a sled to loosen up the chaff from the kernels of wheat. Then all of it is put into a sieve, like a strainer, and shaken violently so the kernels, the good stuff, falls through, and the inedible stuff, the chaff and the straw is left in the strainer.

Ultimately, sifting serves a crucial purpose: separating the kernels from the chaff, the desirable from the undesirable, the useful from the useless, so the good stuff can be used and the bad stuff thrown away. Threshing is God's way of loosening our grip on the things of this world, the things we want to hold onto, the sins we cling to, the control we crave. And Sifting is God's way of removing that which kills from us so that he may have us for himself, prepared and ready. It's not God's way of punishing us, it's his way of loving us.

Think about what the violent sifting did for Job? Job made it through two terrible chapters without sinning in what he said, and then there are about 30 chapters where he voices his complaint to the Almighty of all the ways God has wronged him. And what's the end of the matter? Job is brought to repentance. The sifting sifts out the chaff, Job's bitterness, and arrogance, and complaining. Job replied to God, **"I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know... Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."** Job 42:3,6

Think about Simon! Swords-a-blazing Simon, ready to go with Jesus to the point of death. Simon's brazen ego and his self-reliance needed to be threshed, beaten away from him and separated in the sieve. After all, the whole brazen bit crumbled to pieces at the question of a servant girl, and then crumbled again, and a third time. Just in time for the rooster to crow!

That brings at last to our most important question. 3. What does Jesus do when Peter and his followers fail? And not just little bitty failures. The disciples are goners, nowhere to be found. But Simon Peter puts three nails in his coffin and buries himself alive. And Jesus knew he was going to do it. Remember what he said, **"I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail."** Behind the scenes Jesus is interceding for us, asking for strength for us, praying the things that we should be asking for and don't.

All the while Jesus is expending his high priestly prayers on us, he's watching us march headlong into failure that he's warned us about. **"Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."** (23:34). And when the deed was done that next morning, and Simon Peter had called down heaven and earth to disown Jesus, Jesus confronted Peter with one look and spoke not a word, no "I told you so!" Instead, the rooster proclaimed his haunting call to repentance with his simple morning crow. I've never

heard a more haunting sound than standing in Jerusalem near the St. Peter's Church of the Crowing Rooster. I knew immediately what Peter felt. It put me to death.

As Peter went out that night and wept, Jesus went on. For even **"If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself."** **2 Timothy 2:13.** He went on to do exactly what must be done to bring dust and ashes back to life. He went to his death and by his death broke the power of death. He brought life back to life, life to the full, life that lasts forever. And he turns us back from death forever. Just as he said to Peter, **"When you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."** (22:32).

Peter fell as hard as you can fall, and the Lord's word's invited him to get back off the floor, to turn back and see Jesus the Lamb going uncomplaining forth to his death, and afterwards he would see the light of life. Those words Jesus spoke to him were the only thing he could hold onto in the midst of his weeping. **"When you have turned back."** As surely as Jesus knew Peter would fail, he also prayed and strengthened him to turn back. *Jesus wanted him* back after all he had done, and not just him but you as well. And there's nothing Satan the murderer and the accuser, can say about it. **"For the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been hurled down."** (Rev. 12:10).

Finally, when Jesus calls sinners back to himself, he doesn't leave them to sit and mope. He gives them valuable work to do. **"Strengthen your brothers."** Or as Jesus commissions Peter after the resurrection, **"Feed my lambs."** Or as King David said when he had been restored. **"Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you."** Psalm 51:13.

Satan's sifting serves God's purpose. It's not punishment. It's not smiting. As Satan sifts, Jesus confronts, forgives, and strengthens. He loves us enough to rid us of the dust, and ash, and chaff that cannot live in his presence. Sifting is his way of loving us. It cannot be anything else. Amen.

In all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28