

Lenten Resolves

Homily delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Ash Wednesday, March 6, 2019

In the name of the one God, creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

This morning I read of the experience a former seminary classmate of mine had following the 7:00 a.m. Ash Wednesday service at his parish. A parishioner approached him and explained how much they had enjoyed his homily ... and then continued by saying he could have gotten his message across in just three words.

Easter is coming.

That parishioner was right. Easter *is* coming. We understand this because Christians have had the benefit of that knowledge for more than 2,000 years. We know this because we have the Scriptures and an awareness of how the story ends (well, at least *this* portion of the story). We know this because our entire faith is based on the triumphant moment that Jesus defeated death and emerged from the tomb.

Easter *is* coming. But Easter is not here ... *yet*. Before we get to that day, just as we move through the night in anticipation of the sunrise, we now begin our journey through Lent in anticipation of the resurrection morning. And during these next 40 days, there are things we can do to prepare ourselves.

When speaking of Lent, we use and hear familiar words to explain the meaning of the season: penitence; obedience; discipline; reflection. People deliberate what to give up in their lives or what new discipline to add. They make choices about adding devotional reading, or diving more deeply into the Gospels. They decide what new form of exercise to add ... exercise for the body, or the mind, or the soul.

In the final chapter of one of my favorite novels (and one you have heard me mention in the past), *The Great Gatsby*, the title character's father has come to attend his son's funeral and is in conversation with Nick Carraway. The father pulls out a book that Gatsby had had as a child and begins to read to Nick from a list of things that his son had written into it:

*General resolves. No wasting time at Shafters or [a name, indecipherable]. No more smoking or chewing. Bath every other day. Read one improving book or magazine per week. Save \$5.00 [crossed out] \$3.00 per week. Be better to parents.*¹

¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby* (Kindle edition), p. 173.

As a young boy, Gatsby had gone through moments of introspection. He had reflected on himself and his life and determined what he could do to improve both. As the title of his list stated, he resolved to do more ... and to become better.

I do not know what was on F. Scott Fitzgerald's mind when he was writing this chapter, but this list has a very Lenten feel to it. Is not what Gatsby was doing here a seemingly Lenten discipline? We are called to look inwardly, to reflect on our lives and our relationship with God. As the ashes are marked on our foreheads, we are called to reflect on their meaning ... to reflect on the dust from which we came, and on the overwhelming love of God that caused him to bring us out of the dust. We are called to reflect on those things that separate us from God ... on the actions of our lives and the sins we commit that distance us from God.

And, like Gatsby and his personal self-improvement list, we are called to make resolves ... to make decisions and changes in our lives to bring us back into right relationship with God. Gatsby ended his list by resolving to find ways to be better to his parents; Lent is our opportunity to find a way to be better to God through improving or adjusting how we use the life he has given us.

As the Easter sunrise approaches, we should not be afraid of the Lenten dark. The God who created us ... who brought us forth from the dust ... is with us and loves us. As we make mistakes and struggle to become better, God is with us and loves us. In the miracle of the resurrection of his Son, God shows that he is with us and loves us. And throughout all time, even to the day when we return to the dust from which we have been formed, God will be with us and love us always.

Amen.