



## SUNDAY SERMON

# Practicing Heavenly Citizenship

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We're begun to practice Lent here at St. Columba's. We've been marked with ashes that remind us of our mortality and brokenness. We've recited our Litany of Penitence-- a heart to heart talk with God about the ways in which we fall short of God's hopes for us as children made in God's image. We've watched Jesus spar with the devil in the wilderness, modeling what it means to remain allied with God despite the tempting allure of worldly values.

And now, with a month to go in this season that culminates in the cross and the empty tomb, many of us are still pondering how to respond to the church's invitation "to the observance of a holy Lent." I find it helpful to remember that during Lent, the church offers us a time to think about whether and where we feel evidence of God's love in our lives, and how to let that love shine through more clearly in all our relationships.

We don't need a church calendar, or even a church for that matter, to guide us to a better understanding of ourselves as loved and loving people. The culture that surrounds us offers numerous avenues for personal affirmation and self-improvement that don't involve forty days of reflection in a church community. But we come together in Lent in order to grow in ways that transcend what our culture can teach us.

The start of Lent can be challenging, as the church draws attention to our frailties in contrast to Jesus' unshakable resilience. This can make us feel rather small and ill-equipped to make Lent a time of growth and change. Every year I find myself needing to push back against the idea of Lent as an obligation--an exam I need to pass in order to experience Easter--rather than as a gift, a chance to strengthen my faith and better appreciate who I can be in God's new creation.

Observing a "holy Lent" draws us back to a core question that stirs within people of faith all year whenever we stop to think about it: how can we follow Jesus more closely into the life that God desires for us? And I sometimes wonder about another question: to whom does it really matter? Yes, it matters to me--at least I want it to. I know that on Easter morning I can sing "He is risen...tell it out with joyful voice" with deeper feeling if I've spent time in Lent making more room in my heart for Jesus.

But what if I don't manage to have a holy Lent? Who would care if any of us decided to skip Lent, or to take a hiatus from the faith in order to focus on other priorities? Surely there would be people in this room who would miss us, but

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### PREACHER

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would anyone outside these walls care? Would the world notice if we stopped functioning as Christians? Do we know anyone—in our families, our workplaces, our schools, our neighborhoods—who would be the least interested, much less distressed or brought to tears, at the prospect of our falling out of relationship with God?

To those of us whose answer would be no, no one would care, the church today offers good news that comes in two rather solemn teachings. Lent was not yet observed when Luke composed his gospel in the small Roman colony of Palestine and when Paul composed his letter to anxious followers of Jesus in Philippi. But both messages affirm that what was at stake for the first-century faithful still matters for us in Lent 2019.

Both Jesus and Paul offer passionate pleas to people whose relationships to God seem tenuous. In loving, anguished and tearful words, they call out to us that yes, following Jesus into the life God seeks for us does matter. Doing so is precious to God, to Jesus and to the whole family of faith, and God's kingdom can't be a reality on earth unless we commit to being citizens of it.

Being a Christian in Paul's day and in Luke's could be socially and politically risky. Paul knows that his friends face heavy pressure to assimilate with the culture around them, drifting away from a life grounded in Christ. The people of Philippi were subject to Roman law and looked to Rome for their civic identity. But Paul reminds them "our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior" (Phil. 3: 20).

This bold, even subversive message about citizenship must have brought Paul's listeners up short. It's a reminder to me today that God's value system has a claim on my identity that is stronger than any other affiliation. But it can be hard to honor my heavenly citizenship when the world offers choices that seem safer and easier.

To those who struggle with this pressure, Paul implores them not to give up as followers of Jesus. He suggests that if he can do it, so can they: "Join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us." (3: 17). Paul has called himself an imitator of Christ. He recognizes that for this movement to endure its members need to emulate the Christ-like qualities--grace, compassion, courage-- they see in him and in others. In this way, following Jesus is not a test for each individual but a process of learning and practice in a community that is growing to be Christ's body in the world.

Like Paul, Jesus in Luke's gospel is anxious that his followers stay on God's side in the clash of earthly and heavenly loyalties. Some Pharisees interrupt Jesus' busy agenda of ministry in Galilee, urging him to leave because Herod wants to kill him. We might look at this moment as Jesus' "fourth temptation" in our Lenten season—he can escape arrest if he follows this advice to move away from Herod's jurisdiction.

But Jesus won't be deterred by Herod, whom he calls "that fox," (Luke 13: 32) from proclaiming the kingdom of God, even though Jesus is seen as a threat to the prevailing religious and political order. He sets his gaze on Jerusalem—the center of that power system— anticipating that he, like earlier prophets who pleaded on God's behalf, will be rejected and killed.

This episode offers a preview of what Palm Sunday is going to feel like, when we cast our heavenly citizenship aside and defer to the enemies of Jesus. But today Jesus shows us what it

would mean if instead of drifting away we could follow him into our life with God. To the world about to reject him, Jesus says "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (13: 34).

What might it be like to follow Jesus under the wings of this protective, embracing mother hen God? Since the world began, God's great desire has been for us to live together as children under God's tender wings. Our lives are as fragile and our faith is as tentative as a brood of newborn chicks, while the dangers, obstacles and temptations of the world lie in wait like the fox.

Chicks can only imitate their mother and one another as they learn through practice how to grow and flourish in the world around them. Jesus, as vigilant and as vulnerable as the hen, calls us to be his brood.

Perhaps for us a "holy Lent" can include reflecting on what part we're called to play as members of that brood, imitating as best we can the acts of grace, compassion and justice modeled for us in Jesus. Indeed, at the center of our mission here at St. Columba's is the recurring invitation to "Practice Life with Christ."

Notice, it's not about "perfecting life with Christ" but "practicing." By going deeper in prayer, exploring scripture, discerning our gifts, reaching out to those in need, and sharing our faith, we can grow and strengthen one another not only on our Lenten walk with Jesus but in our ongoing quest to discover the life God desires for each of us and for this community, where everyone's prayers and presence matters.

Let us learn from, imitate and practice with one another. Like Paul's anxious friends and Jesus' brood of fledgling chicks, we can take our place as active citizens of the heaven God seeks to establish on earth.

Amen.