



Indiana-Kentucky Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Pastoral Message for Lent 2024
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Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

[Jesus, Matthew 6:1]

“Have a miserable Lent!”

That’s how a Lutheran pastor friend of mine closed out his emails during Lent a few years ago. Given his personality, this was done mostly tongue in cheek. But it also highlighted how we often approach this holy season. We tend to think and act like its 40 days of admitting and tackling our sins, disciplining ourselves by giving up stuff we enjoy, and becoming better people. The more miserable we can be, the better prepared we will be to have a happy Easter...or so we sometimes think and act.

On Ash Wednesday this year, a devotional app that I use, *Pray as You Go*, invited meditation on the scripture passage that has given us the triad of traditional Lenten disciplines – prayer, fasting, and giving alms – Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18. The narrator of the devotional closed the time of meditation and prayer very differently from the way my friend closed his Lenten emails:

Jesus clearly hopes that we will enjoy special times of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. What plans do you have to enjoy this Lent? Try listening to what God is offering you and talking to God about your own hopes.

That question in the context of the reading from Matthew suggested to me that we will have a miserable Lent when we focus our attention only or primarily on ourselves and what we do or don’t do, as individuals or as communities of faith. Being turned in on ourselves is one of Martin Luther’s definitions of sin.¹ It’s rooted in thinking or believing that our salvation, our wholeness, our faithfulness is dependent on us. And it will always leave us miserable as we realize over and over again along the way that we can never do enough or do the right things consistently enough to give us peace. Over and over again, we encounter the joy-stealing muck of our sin and shortcomings and become mired in misery.

Focusing on God and what God offers us is another matter. When we own up to our sin and shortcomings AND listen and look for what God is offering us – in Christ crucified and risen, in our neighbors in need, in the fellowship of the body of Christ, in the sacraments, in our times of leisure or work, in the fasting and praying and dwelling in scripture – we are found by joy and lifted by hope. We die and rise to new, abundant, and lasting life with Jesus, again and again.

What plans do you have to enjoy this Lent? Try listening and looking for what God is offering you in the mundane moments of each day and in your life together in the body of Christ.

May you have an enjoyable Lent!

+Bishop Bill Gafkjen

¹ Scripture describes human beings as so curved in upon themselves that they use not only physical but even spiritual goods for their own purposes and in all things seek only themselves. (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 25, p. 345).