

pray . fast . give .



Living Lent | Day 18

Trading the Ashes for a Crown

"The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor....to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy, instead of mourning..."

Isaiah 61: 1, 3b. NIV

Encouragement for the Lenten Journey:

Welcome to the 3rd section of Isaiah. This passage is familiar for many of us because it's what Jesus quotes when He is invited to read the scroll in worship in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry in Luke 4:14.

But it was revolutionary when Isaiah spoke it too. 3rd Isaiah would have shocked it's 7th-5th century BC hearers because it had the temerity to include foreigners and even eunuchs in God's salvation plans following the Hebrew return from Babylonian exile. In this passage, the hearers would have been steeped in the tension between the people who'd been left behind in Jerusalem (all those years ago) and those who had returned. After all, the Babylonians only kidnapped those worth kidnapping! But Isaiah's message is clear. God's redemption is for any who accept it.

When I'm honest, I am not so different. I struggle with God's grace extended to people who don't look, talk, worship, or even vote like me! But Isaiah reminds me that God's grace is not a commodity to be hoarded but a gift that extends to everyone. Even my enemies. Perhaps most shockingly, even to me. It is for all those who are made in His image who accept it.

Perhaps J. Taylor Ludwig said it best when she wrote: "I was shocked, confused, bewildered as I entered heaven's door, not by the beauty of it all nor the lights or its decor. But it was the folks in heaven who made me sputter and gasp –the thieves, the liars, the sinners, the alcoholics, the trash. There stood the kid from seventh grade who swiped my lunch money twice. Next to him was my old neighbor who never said anything nice. Uncle Bill, who I always thought was rotting away in hell, was sitting pretty on cloud nine, looking incredibly well. I nudged Jesus, "What's the deal? I would love to hear your take. How'd all these sinners get up here? God must've made a mistake. "And why's everyone so quiet, so somber – give me a clue." "Hush, child," said he, "they're all in shock. No one thought they would see you."

Fast forward 500 years and Jesus has returned from the wilderness and gone to church with his family in his home town. They all thought they knew WHAT, they just needed to know WHO.

When Jesus explained to them that "...today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," they would have been even more shocked than Isaiah's crowd. Sure they were proud of Jesus. He'd was definitely special. John the Baptist said so. But the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy? The Messiah? From a Mary and Joseph the Carpenter's son? From a backwater village?

And the world isn't so different today. We want our heroes to be SUPER. They should have Ph.D.'s or Super Bowl rings. At LEAST they should be rich and powerful. And by the time we've gotten through with the Savior's job description, if we are honest, he bears little resemblance to Jesus.

But what if, even now, after all those years. After all those mistakes. After all the wrong turns and detours, mix-ups, bumps, bruises, and scars. What if even in all the success and triumph of your life, Jesus has never forgotten Isaiah's promise, for me and for YOU, and for the world? Further, what if He's saying even now, "Today, this Scripture IS fulfilled in your hearing." What would that sound like to a thirsty culture, a starving world, a fractured country? What would it feel like to YOUR soul?

Challenge to Prayer and the Exercise of the Privilege of Generosity

As you pray and sacrifice throughout this Lenten Journey, will you take this opportunity to pay forward in generosity a gift of at least \$1 per day throughout the 40 days for the Children of Morningstar? It is a privilege and a blessing to give as we all look forward to Easter and the Resurrection.

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Contributor

Reverend Alan Akridge is the Rector at Saint Mark's Episcopal Church in Brunswick, Georgia, a warm, caring, and diverse community, welcoming all people regardless of where they are in their faith journey. Not unlike the experience of J. Taylor Ludwig through the mentoring of her own pastor, Reverend Alan can be found counseling and teaching Christ and His love to the Morningstar Children on any given Sunday afternoon in person and in the Chapel on the Morningstar campus.

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Brunswick, GA 31525

Perry Counseling Center
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Perry, GA 31069

Morningstar Residential Campus
1 Youth Estate Drive
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