

*We don't need a bigger candle, we need to dim the lights*

Ash WednesdayB

Grace Church Newton

February 14, 2024

THIS IS A DRAFT TEXT OF THE SERMON. IT MAY VARY FROM THE PRESENTED VERSION. PLEASE EXCUSE TYPOS AND GRAMMATICAL ERRORS, AND DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION.

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Earlier this week I had the pleasure of participating in an on-line retreat with a group of clergy colleagues. The speaker, Rev. Becca Stevens, began her reflections on Lent with this advice: We don't need a bigger candle, we need to dim the lights. We don't need a bigger candle, we need to dim the lights.

You see, God's spirit is ever-present, beckoning us to see and to draw near. And yet in our world today that light, that flame, the presence of God can be so easily overshadowed by all the shiny things. Or our ability to see the Holy can be dimmed by the un-holy in our world – war, people uprooted and cast as refugees across the globe, politicians who cynically maneuver for political advantage over the well-being of the people they are sworn to represent. Or to use a different sensual metaphor, that still, small voice of God can be so easily drowned out by the loud, brash, voices of our culture...by the never-turned-off soundtracks to which we live – music, televisions in the background – or maybe in the foreground, podcasts or telephone calls in our ears even when we're out for a walk. We don't need a bigger candle, we need to dim the lights.

And once a year, through the wisdom that has developed in our tradition over the centuries, we are invited into a time that can help us do just that. To still ourselves. To lower the bright lights, to turn down the soundtrack, to begin to notice. In this season of Lent, we are invited not to compete with more bright light, but to calm the stimuli around us, within us, so we notice the light that is always there. So that we can experience God's abiding, ever-present care for each of us.

Today's Gospel offers practices for drawing our attention toward God – these three expressions of piety that we have traditionally used to describe Lenten practices: alms-giving, prayer, and fasting. The author of Matthew offers a caution: let your alms-giving be done in secret; let your prayer take place in private; let your fasting go unnoticed by those around you. Perhaps the author of Matthew is highlighting a concern that some of the pious practices of their time may have been motivated more by desire for social prestige or earthly recognition than by a desire to seek God. It seems, though, that the author was also

pointing toward *simplicity*, toward practices and habits that might help us dim the lights and *notice* God's presence.

I always find it ironic that on this day when we're explicitly discouraged from advertising our spiritual practices, we all line up literally to mark our piety on our foreheads. Our practice may seem incongruous with Jesus' teachings in Matthew, but I, for one, am grateful. Acting in secret, praying in private, fasting alone...this can feel lonely, isolating.

So, when I see all of us lined up to mark the beginning of Lent on our very bodies, when I know that in sanctuary after sanctuary around the world, so many other people are marking this season along with us, I feel accompanied. The light outside dims a bit; I see the glow of the candle a bit more.

We are all given the same invitation: to still ourselves; to notice; to embrace this countercultural practice of marking our bodies with the sign of Christ; of taking this season apart from the clamor of the world around us; of dimming the lights so we can see the ever-abiding glow of God's love beckoning us.

We don't need a bigger candle, we need to dim the lights. In this season of Lent and beyond, may God give us the grace to see.

Amen.