

**A sermon preached by the Rev. Jeanne Leinbach  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
on Ash Wednesday - February 26, 2020**

*Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21*

Well, someone is trying to get our attention! “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes.” Just picture this...the weary regiment in formation...eyes glued to the horizon...an eerie silence covers the land...and then, a faint rumble is heard...and then, the sound of beating hooves grows louder and louder...and up over the horizon comes a great army, so many in number, it is a blackness spread across the mountain, charging into battle. “Yet even now, says the Lord.” “Even now, return to me with all your heart.” It is never too late, no matter what is charging over the horizon. It is never too late. “Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” How do we return to the Lord? We “rend our hearts.” This is the great gift of the season of Lent...to break open...to open our hearts to God’s all-knowing love.

Martin L. Smith is an Episcopal priest. He is a writer, spiritual director and retreat leader. In his book *A Season for the Spirit: Readings for the Days of Lent* (Church Publishing, 2004), he encourages us to imagine ourselves at the banks of the river Jordan, where Jesus is being baptized, and gazing out over the wilderness where Jesus will journey for forty days. Smith writes: “This is the place where we are all invited to stand at the beginning of Lent to take in the meaning of this movement from the river to the desert, and to be caught up in it ourselves. Lent is the season for the Spirit of truth, who drove Jesus into the wilderness to initiate him into the truth that sets us free” (p. 4). God invites us to wander in our own wilderness, to let go of all that

we think we ought to be and discover who we are. God invites to enter into our truth, and so, be free.

In the wilderness, we cannot control the forces of nature. We must first surrender to the environment, to whatever comes our way - the heat, the cold, the rain, the wind - we surrender and then find our way. During the season of Lent, we are invited to surrender...to let go of all that we try so hard to control – our career path, our relationships, our daily schedule, even our health – to let go and give ourselves over to exploring our self – our skills and abilities, and even more so, our desires and motivations and behaviors. We surrender to who we are, we recognize and accept all that we are...and then, we are set free...we know our true self, the place we are intimately connected with God, and so no longer need to control all of life. When we embrace our most essential, authentic self, we open our hearts. We allow ourselves to be led by God. We find ourselves asking God each and every morning to inspire our relationships with one another, our decision-making in our daily lives, how we live in this world. Smith describes surrender as “...the laying down of resistance to the One who loves me infinitely more than I can guess” (p. 5). This is what we need to remember...God loves our true selves, our, oh so human, true selves – our essentialness, our particularity, our quirks and foibles, our gifts to share, our possibility.

Smith concludes, “Lent is about the freedom that is gained only through exposure to the truth. ... The Greek word we translate as truth literally means ‘unhiddenness.’ Truth is not a thing; it is rather an event. Truth happens to us when the coverings of illusion are stripped away and what is real emerges into the open” (p. 5). Let us embrace this Lenten season by reflecting, by going deep within ourselves, rending our hearts, opening ourselves to the most essential characteristics of who we are, and in so doing, receive God’s all-powerful, all-knowing, unconditional love. Amen.