

Sermon for the Last Sunday After the Epiphany: 2 Peter 1:16-21

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Can y'all believe Ash Wednesday's this week? Got your Lenten disciplines ready? To be clear, Lenten disciplines shouldn't be about shame or guilt. Ultimately, they should bring you closer to God. Now, some folks take something on, some give something up. Me, I'm giving up fascism. Whatever you choose to do, it should be something you encounter often, provide a connection to God, or strengthen some aspect of your faith. There's lots of ways to do Lent, like the old tradition of taking a mundane object and pairing it with a short prayer. For example, anytime you touch a doorknob say something like "Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Doesn't even have to be outloud. And no, you're not praying to doorknobs. You're using a doorknob to bring your mind back to God. Think of how often you touch doorknobs -- that's a lot of prayer! If you're giving up chocolate, do the same thing. (Don't give up chocolate if you don't care about chocolate, by the way; that's cheating.) Give up something you'll notice isn't there and every time you notice, don't dwell on its absence or the shame you feel after eating a whole bag of M&Ms 'cause you thought Jesus wasn't looking. Feel the draw, and redirect that energy to God.

Lent's our echo of Jesus walking through the wilderness, giving up his life, and returning in an effort to fix what's broken. And that means acknowledging that something's broken. The hard part is, sometimes Lent sheds light on things that're broken that we kinda like. And if that needs to be fixed or even discarded, that could mean the death of something we hold dear, like a desire, a possession, or a particular temptation. Hard as that is, Jesus showed us that resurrection's on the other side. Lent kinda reminds us that our lamps need tending, wicks need trimming, oil needs refilling. Or these days, lamps need changed lightbulbs, neat cords so no one trips, sturdy bases so they don't tump over. The tending takes a different form these days, but the purpose remains the same. We need light to see in the dark. And if we neglect that light, darkness overcomes. Some would even prefer to shove the whole thing under a basket to hurry the darkness along.

In case you couldn't tell, I'm not talking about light fixtures anymore. Our care for light and hope and faith requires vigilance and constant work, and I'm afraid many of us've only begun to tend with vigilance recently. We've got tending to do, and Lent's as fine a time as any to do it. Now, I'm far from the first to preach on the brokenness of the world. That's kinda Christianity 101. Scary word incoming: brokenness is sin, and sin is the separation from God and other people. That's basic, and like all the basics, talking about sin gets complicated real quick. So here goes complicated: there's a claim that if the disturbing Epstein Files were released without the redactions hiding the *perpetrators'* identities, our entire system would crumble. Y'all, if the system cannot exist without protecting a secret network committing unspeakable atrocities, it does not deserve to exist. I don't want the system crumbling for the sake of crumbling. I want it replaced with something better, something more equitable, more fair, more loving, more human-centered, and ultimately, more free.

Political alignment doesn't matter a lick. This isn't about party, it's about power and exorbitant wealth. The Bible doesn't say a thing about Democrats and Republicans, but it does say quite a lot about the deeply destructive predilections of the wealthy. There are certainly right-to-left issues that need our attention. But right now the priority's gotta be up-to-down. As it stands, we defer to the wealthy and scapegoat the poor, with the wealthy being anyone above us and the poor anyone below us. This system is so entrenched that capitalism's become indistinguishable from American pseudo-patriotism. Lent sure would be a fine time to exchange that for a system prioritizing care for those further down, just as scripture says. I know, that makes some folks itchy, but y'all, the financial constraints we're feeling right now are the natural consequences of unfettered capitalism, because what matters in capitalism is maximal profit, not the well-being of the humans in the system. There's this inevitable feeling that capitalism is the only way forward. But this system is fundamentally broken. The

dollar's hemorrhaging value; wages are stagnant; inflation continues to rise; prices go up. Capitalism's working exactly as it's meant to: maximizing capital regardless of the human cost. But remember, people made this up. There's nothing that says we can't make up something else. Something that puts the human person at the center with the goal not of profit but of encouraging every person to become fully alive. Problem is, we can't get there within the framework of the current system. And we certainly can't get there by turning a blind eye to the atrocities that've come to light over the past year. This would be a drastic change, and maybe it's naive. But y'all, no human system is inevitable. Just because the world is this way, doesn't mean it has to be this way. We made up our systems before; we can make 'em up again. Admittedly, there's a lot to change, but things're changing anyway. Might as well change 'em for the better. It is gonna be Lent, after all.

Communities are banding together for just such change. People're fighting back, and they're not fighting for the world to return to what it was before ICE invaded their neighborhoods. They're not fighting just to return to the inequities that existed before their neighbors were taken and killed. They're not fighting for systems that drown entire families in medical debt just 'cause someone had the misfortune of getting sick. They're not fighting for wages so low that the dream of homeownership has evaporated for entire generations. They're not fighting to preserve a system that allows for the unchecked human trafficking of little boys and little girls. They're fighting for change. Change that promotes dignity at every step; change that prioritizes people over profit; change that emphasizes justice, equity, and mercy; change that gets rid of bootstraps and replaces 'em with helping hands. Communities grow stronger when they put their people first.

That's what Jesus did. He challenged the system and forced a change in perspective. Where legalism and the crushing power of empire ruled, he insisted that people should come first, and the systems of that day shook with the fear of such a threat. Prioritizing people was such a threat that the systems of his day preferred to execute the Son of God rather than listen to him. Now, I don't know if you know this, but Jesus wasn't American, and it may seem like a stretch to say economic systems relate to theology. You know the story of the Good Samaritan? Folks with power and influence passed by an injured man, but only the "bad hombre" stopped to help. Our system outlaws "bad hombres" while also outlawing regular people's ability to cross the road to help. We saw a man executed for just that last month. Or remember how I told you people in Minneapolis were getting groceries for their neighbors who're too afraid to go outside? ICE is following white people with grocery bags to find out where they're going and punishing the people they find along with the helpers. Y'all, that's a direct affront to the literal act of loving one's neighbor as commanded by God. It doesn't get much more theological than that.

The rise of authoritarianism is indelibly connected to capitalism; Mussolini said as much -- Mussolini! There's almost no part of this system that doesn't profit. The concentration camps are for-profit; the more people they hold, the more money they make. Medical services inside are provided at the bare minimum, if at all, to cut costs and increase the bottom line; the less they help the imprisoned sick, the more money they make. ICE agents are incentivized by long-term bonuses and a quota system; the more people they detain, the more money they make. Many of the justifications for why this is supposedly necessary are economic, too: immigrants are stealing our jobs, manufacturing will return, social service funds are strapped, fraud's rampant, your tax dollars are being stolen, foreigners don't pay their share, you get the idea. None of those are true, certainly not to the degree the arguments claim, but they knit capitalist progress to the rise of authoritarian control. And in a system that consistently prioritizes profit over people, corporations will take any step they're allowed to to maximize profits at the expense of their employees and customers. The same is true for individuals. As long as personal wealth equates to influence and power, some will prioritize the accumulation of wealth over everything else. As our system exists now, valuing human life doesn't buy influence, so unless you have a conscience, there's no incentive to care about what happens to your neighbor.

During these next 40 days, alongside whatever disciplines you adopt, it's worth considering how the accumulation of anything other than human thriving has become an affront both to the image of God borne by every person and the primacy in creation our scripture assigns to humanity. At least as our Creation Myth puts it, God places us above all other created things, and rather than honor that status in how we shape our existence, we slough off our favored place in exchange for a fabricated system of capital. God favors humanity. We favor money. And the love of money is the root of all evil. That's the kind of examination Lent calls us into. The deep, unflinching, painful, challenging, and ultimately faithful examination that, once completed, settles for nothing less than the dismantling of whatever drags us away from God and other people. So, I'm at least *trying* to give up fascism for Lent. But I'm also taking on the discipline of imagining a system rooted in the values of Jesus. 'Cause Lent doesn't leave us in the wilderness or even on the cross. It takes us all the way to resurrection, where influence and wealth give way, and all things, even our systems, will be made new.