

March 5, 2014 – Ash Wednesday

Based on: “Lent: Preparing our Garden for Growth” By Skye Jethani

I met with a pastor a few weeks ago and asked him if he had a preaching series for Lent. He said, “I don’t do Lent or follow a church calendar.” He’d been preaching through a book of the Bible and was going to continue with that. He wasn’t having an Ash Wednesday service & would not be doing anything special or different during Lent.

I was surprised to find out, despite its rich history in the church, many don't observe Lent. When I was growing up, Lent was a big deal in the Catholic faith. When I became a Christian through people attending a Nazarene church I was surprised that Lent was a big deal in that Nazarene church, I thought it was just a Catholic thing. But I have also learned that there are many Christians even in some other Nazarene churches who "don't do Lent." They never really talked about Lent or the Holy Week leading up to Easter as a chance to know Jesus better.

Lent, is one of the most ancient Christian practices. The early church observed Lent even before Christmas became a holiday. During this 40-day period before Easter we are called to take inventory of our lives, commune more intimately with God, and clear out those things that may distract us from our commitment to him. In a sense, it is a season of preparing for spiritual growth.

The Lenten season begins tonight and it's our prayer that this night might inspire you toward taking a special journey of transformation—a journey that finds its climax (and turning point) at Easter.

Someone has said, "If our hearts are like gardens, then Lent, like the thaw between winter and spring, is a time of preparation. It's a season when we are invited to prepare the soil of our lives for growth." - Skye Jethani

My grandfather (my mom’s dad) was a farmer. He was a farmer in Italy and when he came here to the US he always had a huge garden in his back yard... in the Bronx if you can believe that. He loved being out in the garden. I’m sure in the winter months he was anxious for the winter thaw so he could get to work on the garden. It was a lot of work to clear the old to prepare for the new, but he loved it.

As Christians around the world celebrate Lent today I want to challenge you to consider how the season might prepare your heart for growth, new life, and the fruitfulness of a well tended garden.

To help us better understand what this looks like, we're going to look at the story of a man who was not clearing a garden for growth, but clearing a kingdom. Asa was the king of Judah at a time when much of the nation had abandoned God. In 2 Chronicles 15:1–19 we find the story of how Asa and his entire kingdom sought God and made room in their lives for growth.

2 Chronicles 15

Then the Spirit of God came upon Azariah son of Oded, and he went out to meet King Asa as he was returning from the battle. "Listen to me, Asa!" he shouted. "Listen, all you people of Judah and Benjamin! The LORD will stay with you as long as you stay with him! Whenever you seek him, you will find him. But if you abandon him, he will abandon you. For a long time Israel was without the true God, without a priest to teach them, and without the Law to instruct them. But whenever they were in trouble and turned to the LORD, the God of Israel, and sought him out, they found him.

"During those dark times, it was not safe to travel. Problems troubled the people of every land. Nation fought against nation, and city against city, for God was troubling them with every kind of problem. But as for you, be strong and courageous, for your work will be rewarded."

When Asa heard this message from Azariah the prophet, he took courage and removed all the detestable idols from the land of Judah and Benjamin and in the towns he had captured in the hill country of Ephraim. And he repaired the altar of the LORD, which stood in front of the entry room of the LORD's Temple.

Then Asa called together all the people of Judah and Benjamin, along with the people of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon who had settled among them. For many from Israel had moved to Judah during Asa's reign when they saw that the LORD his God was with him. The people gathered at Jerusalem in late spring, during the fifteenth year of Asa's reign.

On that day they sacrificed to the LORD 700 cattle and 7,000 sheep and goats from the plunder they had taken in the battle. Then they entered into a covenant to seek the LORD, the God of their ancestors, with all their heart and soul. They agreed that anyone who refused to seek the LORD, the God of Israel, would be put to death—whether young or old, man or woman. They shouted out their oath of loyalty to the LORD with trumpets blaring and rams' horns sounding. All in Judah were happy about this covenant, for they had entered into it with all their heart. They earnestly sought after God, and they found him. And the LORD gave them rest from their enemies on every side.

King Asa even deposed his grandmother Maacah from her position as queen mother because she had made an obscene Asherah pole. He cut down her obscene pole, broke it up, and burned it in the Kidron Valley. Although the pagan shrines were not removed from Israel, Asa's heart remained completely faithful throughout his life. He brought into the Temple of God the silver and gold and the various items that he and his father had dedicated.

So there was no more war until the thirty-fifth year of Asa's reign.

The story begins with a prophet named Azariah coming to the king with a message. Over and over, Azariah's message in verses 1–7 is the same: seek the Lord. Seek him and you will find him. His message is not a casual recommendation to the king. He is imploring him to do something—to act. Azariah's message is not, "Wander through your life, Asa, and perhaps you will stumble upon God." No, he is challenging Asa to be intentional: seek the Lord.

In the New Testament, people who are followers of Christ, those who seek him, are called disciples. The word *disciple* has the same root as the word *discipline*. A discipline is always intentional, never accidental. We don't learn the discipline of music or language or ice skating without intending to.

The same is true for being Jesus' disciple. There must be intention, a decision, a focus of our will to seek Christ. For many of us, especially those of us who have spent many years in the church, we can forget this. We can become passive and lackadaisical about seeking God.

Lent is a time for all of us – those who know Him for a long time and those who are just beginning to encounter Him - to clarify and reaffirm our intentions. Do we desire to seek God? Will we, with intention, diligence, and discipline, seek him? Or will we just float along, hoping to stumble upon God here and there?

We do not stumble upon rich communion with God accidentally. Azariah's message to Asa is a challenge to be intentional. We are to seek with discipline and focus. We are called to seek the Lord.

But there is more. Azariah says, if you seek him, He will be found by you. It's better translated this way: if you seek the Lord, he will let you find him. The difference is subtle but important. Azariah is saying that God wants to be found. He wants to be taken hold of. The prophet is telling us we are seeking a God that wants to be found.

Ann and I will play hide and seek with Joe & Sue Herrmann's son, Joshua. As he is getting older he is getting better at playing hide and seek. He use to think that as long as he couldn't see us we couldn't see him, so he'd closes his eyes, or put his hands over his eyes and tells us to find him. Even now when he "hides" in an obvious spot. He can easily see him. So we pretend we can't. Even though he is simple standing on the side of the couch against the wall in clear view, we will walk around the living room saying, "where is Josh? Is he behind the curtain?" As look behind the curtain and say, "nope, he's not behind the curtain." Where is he, we can't find him?" Then Josh will say, "I right here!"

God wants us to seek him. But, like Josh, He understands that the real joy is not in seeking, but in finding. He wants to be found. He has not intended the Christian life to be an impossible hunt for an elusive God. Quite the opposite. The Christian life is a simple walk to a welcoming God that requires only child-like faith. Our goal during Lent should be to intentionally seek the God who is passionately seeking us.

How do we do that? What exactly does it mean to seek God? In verse 8, after receiving Azariah's message, we read this:

2 Chronicles 15:8

When Asa heard this message from Azariah the prophet, he took courage and removed all the detestable idols from the land of Judah and Benjamin and in the towns he had captured in the hill country of Ephraim. And he repaired the altar of the LORD, which stood in front of the entry room of the LORD's Temple.

Asa interpreted the command to seek the Lord in two ways. First, he understood that he had to remove the obstacles that were preventing him from finding the Lord. So Asa eliminated the detestable idols from the land: all of the other gods, shrines, and temples that were competing with God for the people's devotion.

You could say that Asa was cleaning out his kingdom to make space for God. This was his way of preparing the garden, removing the dead plants, the weeds, the debris to make room for new growth. Seeking God means making room in our lives for him—cleaning out the garden, removing the idols and false gods of our kingdom.

Like Asa's kingdom, sometimes our kingdoms need a thorough cleaning. They become infested with detestable things: idols and false gods, things that occupy God's proper place. To seek God means we make space for him—we prepare our lives, our kingdoms, for his presence to dwell with us. Patrick Morley said, "The turning point in our lives is when we stop seeking the gods we want, and start seeking the God who is."

The season of Lent is about walking through the hills and valleys of our kingdom and tearing down the idols we find there. It means acknowledging, through confession, those things in our lives that have taken the place of God and prevent us from finding him. Maybe it's a schedule so full there is no time for prayer. Or a heart preoccupied with material things. Or a self-serving career that has stopped you from serving others. Lent is a time to clean out the debris in our lives to make room for new growth.

Traditionally, people have done this through fasting, by releasing something in their lives that has a hold on them. Sometimes this is a food, or a possession, or an activity - freeing up time to seek God and connect with others; Preparing the soil of your life for growth. Seeking God means clearing out the obstacles in our lives, whatever they may be.

There is a second thing Asa did to seek God. He not only removed the idols in his kingdom, but he also repaired the altar to the Lord in front of the temple. The temple, of course, was where God was worshiped in ancient Israel. It is where the people went to encounter and commune with him. By rebuilding the altar, Asa was putting back in place a significant means of connecting with the Lord.

Seeking God is not just about removing things from our kingdoms; it's also about building things, putting things in place that help connect us with the One we are seeking. There needs to be removing, and there needs to be building. We need to subtract some things so we may add others. We need to clear out the debris, but we also need to plant new seeds. Both are essential for growth.

Vehicles that help us commune with God and experience his presence with us are called spiritual disciplines. They are practices that help us seek God—things like prayer, solitude, meditating on Scripture, fasting, serving others, giving, hospitality, worship. Preparing a garden in the spring involves work—disciplines that prepare the soil to accept the seeds, sun, and rain that eventually generate growth. The same is true for Lent.

[Meditation: What do you need to remove & what do you need to put in place?]

Assembling

I want to draw your attention to a discipline Asa used as he and his kingdom sought God.

2 Chronicles 15:9-15

Then Asa called together all the people of Judah and Benjamin, along with the people of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon who had settled among them. For many from Israel had moved to Judah during Asa's reign when they saw that the LORD his God was with him. The people gathered at Jerusalem in late spring, * during the fifteenth year of Asa's reign.

On that day they sacrificed to the LORD 700 cattle and 7,000 sheep and goats from the plunder they had taken in the battle. Then they entered into a covenant to seek the LORD, the God of their ancestors, with all their heart and soul. They agreed that anyone who refused to seek the LORD, the God of Israel, would be put to death—whether young or old, man or woman. They shouted out their oath of loyalty to the LORD with trumpets blaring and rams' horns sounding. All in Judah were happy about this covenant, for they had entered into it with all their heart. They earnestly sought after God, and they found him. And the LORD gave them rest from their enemies on every side.

We see it in verses 9–15: the discipline of assembling. In verse 9 we see that all the people of Judah gathered and people from other countries joined them, because they heard what Asa was up to. They all gathered in Jerusalem to express their intention to seek the Lord. Why is it important that they gathered together for this? Couldn't they have made a commitment to seek God individually and privately?

Something powerful happens when we gather. We see that we are a part of something beyond ourselves, we are connected to others on this journey of seeking God. We are less likely to give up, less likely to turn around, because others beside us are striving toward the same goal. God has intended us to be in community with others, together seeking him. Rather than simply making private, personal resolutions during Lent, we

can gather and resolve to seek God together—and find, through the strength of community, the ability to actually do it.

Let's look more closely at what the people of Judah did at their assembly. First, the people honored the holiness of God. It says they offered sacrifices to him, which was an act of humility and submission. Next, we are told, the people made a commitment, a promise to seek the Lord. As we've already seen, this means removing obstacles and also moving toward God. Then in verse 14, we see that the people made an oath to God, and there was loud acclamation, shouting, and music.

[Pray together: find a partner, pray for one another]

Cycles of seeking

In verse 15, we discover the result of the people's seeking: All in Judah were happy about this covenant, for they had entered into it with all their heart. They earnestly sought after God, and they found him.

Azariah's words were proven true. Asa, and all of Judah, sought the Lord—and he let them find Him—and they rejoiced. This is what Lent is all about: it's about finding the Lord once again, and being found by him.

But Asa's diligence in seeking the Lord did not end after assembling with the people. In fact, it appears to have become even more energized. The season served as a springboard for further cleansing of his kingdom. Look at verse 16.

2 Chronicles 15:16

King Asa even deposed his grandmother Maacah from her position as queen mother because she had made an obscene Asherah pole. He cut down her obscene pole, broke it up, and burned it in the Kidron Valley.

After removing the idols and building the altar, after assembling with the people, and after finding God, Asa then deposed his grandmother from her position as queen mother. He came to see that she, too, was an obstacle preventing him and Judah from seeking God. He cut down her Asherah pole (a form of idol worship), and he also continued to rebuild the temple with gold and silver.

Asa's seeking of God by cleansing his kingdom and building altars continued and intensified. He found courage to do things he may have lacked earlier. It seems he found the courage to remove his own grandmother from power, but only *after* the assembly, after seeking and finding God.

What I want you to see is that seeking God is not a linear pursuit. It is cyclical. Seeking God means removing obstacles, building altars, and finding him, which in turn gives us new courage to remove more obstacles, build new altars, and discover God in an even deeper way. Some have described Christian formation as being like a winding staircase:

it repeats its cycle over and over, but with each cycle we experience new heights of God's grace as we rise with each turn.

We need to remember this during Lent. We need to see that the cycle of seeking and finding continues even beyond this 40-day period. It is the ongoing rhythm of the Christian life, and it should be evident in every season.

Conclusion

In the spring we prepare the garden, we clear the debris, we fertilize the soil, we plant the seeds. But there is still work to be done the rest of the year; our effort does not end once summer begins. Weeds still need to be pulled, bushes pruned, fruit gathered. Still, the spring is set aside especially for preparation, and our diligence at that time can determine how the rest of the year will go.

So it is with Lent. This is a season set aside for preparing our souls: clearing debris, planting seeds. Like Asa, if you engage in this time of seeking, it may serve as a springboard for growth well beyond the present time. You may find the courage down the road to tackle obstacles you can't even identify right now. You may discover the joy of building new altars to God you didn't know you were capable of.

Use this season wisely as a time of preparation for growth. Use this season to walk the hills and valleys of your life and identify the obstacles preventing you from seeking God. Put in place good disciplines that will help you connect with God. Use this season of Lent to truly seek the Lord, the one who is longing to be found.

[Come forward for anointing & blessing]