

**The Rev. Dr. Robert MacSwain**  
**Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church**  
**Ash Wednesday / 1 March 2022**

*Joel 2.1-2, 12-17*

*Psalm 103.8-14*

*2 Corinthians 5.20-6.10*

*Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21*

Today is Ash Wednesday, but for many of us it feels like Lent started several months or even several years ago. Gearing up for the real thing again is just too much to think about, so have some chocolate. I'm reminded of the scene in the 1985 movie *The Goonies* where a kid says, "I'm so depressed," and then sprays some whipped cream right into his mouth. He obviously learned early in life how to deal with his anxieties: substance abuse comes in all shapes and sizes, and if free-basing whipped cream does the trick, why move on to stronger drugs?

Of course, we don't want to be the sort of people who need shots of whipped cream—or anything else—to get us through the day. We want to be free from all such dependencies, mild as they may seem. But life can be so bleak without them! As difficult as things are right now, we increasingly come to rely on these little treats just to manage. Just one drink, just a few cookies, just a cheeseburger and fries, just one more double espresso, just another cigarette, just another ten minutes online, just one more impulse purchase from amazon.com.... And, whether or not these things are bad in themselves, when our days are measured out by them it begins to add up. And, of course, for those who struggle with *real* addictions it's no joke at all.

We may well feel as though a purple Lenten pall has draped over our common life for the past few months or years, but today *is* Ash Wednesday and we've got to face it somehow. You are all here anyway, so that's a good start. But as Mother Leyla rightly asked on Sunday, how can we incorporate the discipline of Lent into our lives in a way that *brings* joy rather than *destroys* joy? The last thing we need right now is more stress and difficulty. One possible answer to this question is to see that discipline is essential to any human activity—that without discipline we would accomplish nothing at all. We would not be "bad people" without discipline: we would barely be human.

But what do I mean by ‘discipline’? According to the dictionary, one definition of ‘discipline’ is “Punishment intended to correct or train.” *Punishment intended to correct or train.* That’s the sort of discipline we hate and fear, and the reason Lent has such a bad reputation. But that definition is actually the *fourth* one offered by the dictionary.

The *first* definition of ‘discipline’ is “Training expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior.” *Training expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior.* Every parent, every teacher, every coach, every employer, every artist, every dancer, every musician, every athlete, every student knows that this sort of discipline is absolutely necessary in order to succeed. It may not always be pleasant, but it should not be hateful, because this sort of discipline allows us to do what we want to do: to hit the ball, or hit the note, to solve the problem, or win the game. This sort of discipline allows us to become the people we want to become.

And so, the great 17<sup>th</sup> century Anglican writer George Herbert begins his poem titled “Lent” with these surprising five words: “Welcome dear feast of Lent.” “Welcome dear *feast* of Lent?” The idea of greeting Lent with open arms seems as contradictory as calling it a feast—but that, of course, is Herbert’s point. We are called to fast occasionally in our Christian lives, so why not do it now, together, for a limited time, and for a specific purpose? We should welcome Lent as a blessed opportunity to turn to Christ for the training we need to become the people we want to be. When parents see a child doing something foolish they often say, “It will end in tears.” But of Lent we should say, “It will end in joy.”

In short, regardless of how well or ill things are going in our mixed-up and messy world, regardless of all the things that distress or dismay us, Lent offers us the annual opportunity to embrace healthy order and welcome discipline in our own mixed-up and messy lives. Indeed, the more mixed-up and messy the world and our lives are, the more important this season becomes. “Welcome dear feast of Lent.”