

**Return/Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

**Preached March 2, 2022/See I Am Doing a New Thing sermon series**

Welcome to worship on this Wednesday evening, friends, as we gather together to begin our journey through the season of Lent. Tonight, we begin a new sermon series that will last until Easter. This is a series that will also be used by several different United Methodist churches in the North Texas Conference. The series is called See I Am Doing a New Thing, and it's based on language from Isaiah 43:19. The season of Lent lasts for 40 days and the number 40 is particularly resonant throughout scripture. While the number 40 was a way in scripture of saying that something lasted a long time, it shows up over and over again in specific contexts. There were 40 days of rain during the flood in Genesis, Moses went for 40 days without food on Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus. Elijah went for 40 days without food on his journey. Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. And Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days. And throughout it all, God continued to work in and through God's people, loving and sustaining them back to life.

During this season of Lent and specifically in this sermon series, we will take a look at what God has done in the past and the ways in which God continues to work in our world today. God is always doing something ancient and something new. The season of Lent is an invitation to us to return to our roots, to stay close to God, and to be open to the ways that we can deepen our relationship with God and live into our unique calling and purpose.

Each of our worship services during Lent will feature a one-word theme. The theme for today is return. That word has a lot of possibilities within it. In a few minutes, I will impose ashes on anyone who would like to receive them. And during that liturgy, I will say, "remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." The ashes we will receive symbolize our own mortality, our own humanity, and our willingness to confess our sin before God and within our

community of faith. We join together tonight as humans living in a world of sin and death that is also a world that was created by God and who live in the light of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ.

We also see meaning in the word return from our renewed spiritual practices that we often engage in during the season of Lent. Different people observe the Lenten season differently – when I grew up in the Catholic church, we would give up something for Lent, like chocolate and we would not eat meat on Fridays. Even folks who don't observe Lent in those ways often incorporate other spiritual disciplines, like praying every day, reading scripture, just trying to go to church more often. In that sense, Lent can also be a return – a return to the spiritual disciplines that ground us in our faith and in our relationship with God. Today's scripture reading from the Gospel according to Matthew talks about practicing our piety and it sounds kind of harsh at first glance – it gives us a list of things we shouldn't do. But what I really like about this passage, is that it automatically implies all the good things we *should* do. It doesn't say not to give alms, it just says that when you do give alms, you shouldn't sound the trumpet and let everyone know. Because if we're being generous, we're not supposed to do it for the attention. It doesn't say not to pray; it says when we do pray, we shouldn't make a big flashy show about it, because that's not the reason we're praying. It says when we pray, we should go in our room and shut the door. And it doesn't say we shouldn't fast; it says when we fast, we shouldn't look dismal, or we shouldn't draw attention to ourselves for the extreme sacrifice we're making, because that's not the reason we're doing it. Everything in this passage helps us to return not only to the spiritual practices that have sustained Christians for thousands of years, but it helps us to return to the reasons we practice them in the first place. We don't do it to show off or draw attention to

ourselves; we practice our piety to deepen our relationship with God and to give thanks to God for the new thing he is always doing in us and around us.

This Lent, my prayer is that all of us can return to spiritual disciplines and practices that enrich our faith, our lives, and our community. One of my Lenten practices this year is to read a new devotional I just purchased called *Good Enough: 40ish Devotionals for a Life of Imperfection*. It was written by Kate Bowler, a professor at Duke Divinity School, and Jessica Richie. I got a little ahead of myself and already read the first devotion and I wanted to share with you a blessing from it that is particularly apt this evening. It is called, “A blessing for beginning a new spiritual practice.” It goes like this: “Blessed are we who are trying a new thing, though we can’t quite see the whole of it. That’s the beauty of the life of faith. We start in the middle, at the heart-center of an unspoken desire to live into the glimpse we’ve had of You and of Your goodness. Blessed are we who ask You to be the guide as begin to build from here and create a strong, more flexible rule of life. Trusting that you are trying to foster life in us. Blessed are we who remember that we will fall short. We will fail, but that doesn’t mean we are ruined. We simply pick up and begin again. Blessed are we, willing to be beginners all over again.”