

Get to; Not Have to
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist and Presbyterian Churches
Ash Wednesday
2-26-2020
Matthew: 6:1-6; 16-21

Every day, I am surrounded by strong, tall, beautiful, resilient oak trees. Sardis oaks!!! I see them out of my office window at Sardis Baptist. And I see them when I drive past the campus of Sardis Presbyterian every day. I have enjoyed Sardis Oaks on both venues today. I love Sardis oaks!!!

And I hadn't really ever thought about it until this week, as I reflected on tonight's text, but it seems to me, our Sardis oaks are in a season of fasting. Winter and its elements are in full swing. Our mighty friends have dug in their heels, and they've shed their leaves – they've decided to let go of all the things that will prohibit a sustained future, or will prevent them from living into a new season of purpose.

And when I think about Sardis oaks, I am struck by one verse in particular:

And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. (Matthew 6:16).

Now, this might be a silly, fanciful thought, but can you imagine our Sardis oaks bemoaning their annual fast? What would it feel like if when you made your way up the church sidewalk, you overheard two oak trees talking? One says to the other, "Ugh, it's SO cold! Why do we need to do this again?" The other says, "I know, girl, don't get me started. And I need green leaves back on my branches, because my trunk looks too washed out. I sure hope this fast is worth it!"

What if our friends slumped and slouched? What if our friends wailed or frowned? What if our friends trended on social media with the hashtag LeavingItAllForLent?

Well, this is a silly thought, because you can't imagine trees bemoaning their fasting, or disfiguring their faces for public attention. Primarily, because in reality, they do just the opposite.

When the weather changes, Sardis oaks don't eat pancakes or throw a Mardi Gras parade, they do something even better. They summon all the nutrients they'll need from their leaves – I liken it to summoning every ray of light, every God-filled moment of presence and purpose in their memory from the prior year – and they extract these nutrients into their soul, their root system. But there is no frowning. There is no grimacing.

First, there is an explosion of color – reds, oranges, yellows, browns, and colors yet to be invented or imagined – the newly-turned leaves sing God's praises in ways our voices can't even conjure. And then, those leaves fall to the ground. Some of them delight three year olds on their nature hikes; some of them create a whole economy for the landscape industry; still others become food for soil that will birth new trees and new plant life.

And there is no slumping. Yes, our oaks are vulnerable and exposed. But they choose not to gird themselves with material protection. Our Sardis oaks, stand tall, straight trunks, arms and branches at attention, confident that God will provide, God will respond, God will make new things in a new season. And I was reminded of such truth, just yesterday, when after an unseasonably warm and sunny day, our friends began to paint their fingernails with the slightest tint of green.

What I'm trying to get at tonight, friends, is that our Sardis oaks enter their season of fasting with eagerness, with resiliency, with humility, and with confidence.

It's not that Sardis oaks *have* to fast. It's that they *get* to fast.

And so my mind gets to wandering some, and eventually wondering, too, how is it that we should approach this coming season of Lent, a season of fasting and discernment?

Do we *have* to Lent? Or do we *get* to Lent?

I've made Lent a verb, I hope that's okay.

It seems to me, that for far too long, we've acted as if we *have* to Lent. Our foreheads marked with ash, our mortality made clear – remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return -- we'll give up our red wine, or our chocolate, or our Facebook page, making everyone else around us wonder why they have to suffer along with us, too, all in the hopes that doing so will somehow illumine the resurrected Christ in a new way. This penance, this discernment, this bemoaning is something we *have* to do, because to do so, is to follow in the life of Jesus.

Well, I think, instead, the author of Matthew is telling us to imagine Lent, or fasting, as something we *get* to do. Yes, those ashes on your forehead represent the fleeting and fragile nature of life – each of ours is but a season. But when those ashes mark you this evening, I hope you'll also smell the oil mixed in them – oil pressed and fused in the same spirit of anointing oils – those that reminded God's people of God's fidelity, protection, and creativity, and of God's investment in God's people. And I hope you'll hear different words: "In Christ, you are forgiven. In Christ, you are enough. In Christ, you are loved. Always. So be at peace."

And yes, by all means, fast. Remove something from your routine that might prevent you from realizing the potential of your next season. But don't do so as penance, or punishment, or obligation, or simply because it makes sense for your neighbor. Think about how you might give up those

material things in your life that prevent you from recognizing God's presence in the present. We *get* to Lent, in order that we might take on the transformative presence of God in our lives.

The Sardis oak fasts every year. Its reward is not some form of instant gratification. Nor does the world stop to celebrate its endurance in rain, and wind, and cold. But somewhere deep inside that tree, the spirit is working, and its soul is singing, and in a silence we cannot process, the tree is giving thanks to its maker. And I have to believe, that somehow, someday, its reward, both seasonally and ultimately, is the experience of resurrection – God's constant shaping and evolving of a created being, at times vulnerable, at times strong, at times perhaps even stubborn, into a created being realizing its potential. New life in new seasons.

Tonight, friends, we shed our own leaves, and we prepare for something yet unseen. We wear the ash, and in our perfectly imperfect, perfectly human bodies, we hear affirmation of God's love for us. And we come to a table, invited by the One who asks us to join in life's banquet, God's little resurrection moments, in remembrance of Him. And we are equipped, with grace, with hospitality, with love to travel that road to Jerusalem, and to Golgotha, and to the Galilean shores beyond. Sardis Oaks will bear new, green leaves. A barren, empty cross will reveal new life. And the things that we empty ourselves of in this season, in soulful silence, will make room for God to speak new truths in our hearts in the seasons to follow.

Friends, we don't *have* to Lent, we *get* to Lent. So let's get to the gettin'!!!

Amen.