

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. (Isaiah 58:1-12)

Of the Empire (by Mary Oliver)

We will be known as the culture that feared death and adored power, that tried to vanquish insecurity for the few and cared little for the penury of the many. We will be known as a culture that taught and rewarded the amassing of things, that spoke little if at all about the quality of life for people (other people), for dogs, for rivers. All the world, in our eyes, they will say, was a commodity. And they will say that this structure was held together politically, which it was, and they will say also that our politics was no more than an apparatus to accommodate the feelings of the heart, and that the heart, in those days, was small, and hard, and full of meanness.

I had two very different formative experiences during my years as an undergraduate in Washington, DC, that shaped the person I was becoming and am still becoming. Each, in different ways, helped me to clarify my faith and ultimately my call to the priesthood.

The first took place during the summer of 1983 on Capitol Hill, at the U.S. Congress, where I served as an intern in the office of Congressman Joe McDade, a Republican who represented the tenth district of Pennsylvania for thirty-six years. I lived at my aunt and uncle's house in Alexandria, Virginia, that summer and every morning I got up and commuted to work with their next-door neighbor, Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner from Wisconsin. (Also a Republican, for those taking notes...)

The other experience was in the housing projects of southeast D.C., where I volunteered as a tutor. While geographically not far from the Capitol Building, if you know anything about the District of Columbia then you know that it was literally worlds away. On Capitol Hill I was moving in the halls of power; less than a mile away from the steps of the Capitol, yet I found myself in some of the poorest and most desperate streets in this nation, tutoring a kid who it seemed unlikely would make it through high school. Same city: but two very different worlds.

I found myself reflecting on both of these experiences last week when I re-read the introduction to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Prophets*. Heschel asks, "what manner of man is the prophet?" He then goes on to write these words:

A student of philosophy who turns from the discourses of the great metaphysicians to the orations of the prophets may feel as if he is going from the real of the sublime to an area of trivialities. Instead of dealing with the timeless issues of being and becoming, of matter and form, of definitions and demonstrations, he is thrown into orations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the market place. Instead of showing us a way through the elegant mansions of the mind, the prophets take us to the slums. The world is a proud place, full of beauty, but the prophets are scandalized, and rave as if the whole world were a slum.

The prophets see the world from the streets of southeast DC or Dismas House or the Mustard Seed in South Worcester. From that place they dare to speak—on behalf of God—to critique all politics and all theology that forgets its true vocation to make streets to live in.

As we embark on our Lenten journey today, the prophet Isaiah has moved from preaching to meddling, making it clear that it is not enough to have our foreheads smudged with ashes and abstain from eating today. It is too easy for our fasting to become a form of narcissism: We live in a world where children will die today because there isn't enough food or clean water in their neighborhood; to give up chocolate or wine or meat in such a world can seem trite. That is not an argument *against* fasting, however. Isaiah's point is simply that fasting is not about us; it isn't about feeling better about ourselves because of our piety or worse about ourselves because of our sinfulness. It is about an invitation to see the world from another perspective. If we can imagine (even if just for a few hours) what it means to be hungry in this world not by choice but necessity that may lead us to act differently. To "give something up during these next forty days" is not about fulfilling some religious obligation—"such fasting will not make our voices heard on."

But if that awareness in our own bodies of what it means to be hungry leads us to make changes in our lives—then it serves a purpose. Lent is about repentance and repentance is about change. So if our fasting leads us to “share our bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into our homes and to cover the naked and to make ourselves available to our own families”—then it is holy and good. If our fasting leads us to identify with the poor and to rebuild ancient ruins and to raise up the foundations and to repair the breach by restoring streets where kids can play “kick the can” and not worry about being shot by a drug dealer then today matters. It puts us back on the right path.

The point of next forty days is not to feel bad; but to do good. *Now* is the acceptable time. *Now* is the time for repairing the breach and for restoring streets worth living in. *Now* is the time to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

If my experience working for Joe McDade and riding to work with Jim Sensenbrenner taught me anything at all it is that neither political party has a monopoly on doing justice and loving mercy. Nor does one party have all the answers or pure motivations. Here at St. Francis we represent various places along the political spectrum: we understand different roles for government as we move toward God’s vision of shalom, and we have different political philosophies about how best to make streets worth living in. That is as it should be and I count it as a blessing.

It is easy, however, to become blind to the way that our own self-interested political choices on both the right and the left adversely affect others. As Mary Oliver points out in the poem found on the cover of today’s bulletin, a dominant culture that “fears death and adores power” leaves us with hearts that are small and hard and mean, and a politics and ultimately a world that reflects those hearts.

There is another way, and Lent is about pointing the way forward. None of us can do this on our own, but it begins with us making real changes in our own lives. If we mean to do justice and love mercy, then we need to learn how to see the world from the perspective of the powerless. It is our shared vocation as the Church to call attention to what life is like in the streets of San Salvador or southeast D.C. or Main South, Worcester, and then to seek and serve Christ in all persons by loving and by acting and by restoring and by repairing.

I say it every year, but because many of us have a lot of old tapes that play on this day, it bears repeating: Lent’s goal is not to inflict guilt. Guilt paralyzes us. Lent’s goal is to inspire hope. Lent invites us to re-orient our lives with the Way of the Cross: a way that leads to Easter morning and the empty tomb and ultimately into the streets of this world and not just the boulevards. Lent’s goal is to rend our hearts, not our garments, because God can work with a broken and contrite heart to make it new again: from small and hard and mean to large and soft and kind.