

Sermon for Christ Church, Spotsylvania, VA
First Sunday in Lent, Year B, February 18, 2018
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Positive Penitence"
Mark 1:9-15

I made some recommendations in my Ash Wednesday sermon about how we might approach Lent; you can read it on the parish web page if you missed it; today I want to continue going deeper into this same topic of approaching Lent by looking at the word "penitential," the idea that is most closely associated with Lent; penitential has to do with repentance, with feeling sorry for our wrongs, and doing something about it; and what I'd like to point out is that there are two different ways of being penitential: one is a more negative kind of penitence, and the other is a more positive kind of penitence

penitential is not a word that gets much use outside of the church, but it is easy to recognize that it is similar in origin and meaning to the word penitentiary; the penitentiary is the place we send criminals for punishment; in many ways, the negative kind of penitence can be experienced as a kind of punishment, of deprivation, of excessive humility, or of feeling guilty; perhaps a more modern view of the penitentiary is that it is the place we send people for rehabilitation; in many ways, the positive kind of penitence can be experienced as a kind of rehabilitation, of fixing problems, of restoration, of reestablishing relationships, or of putting things back to where they rightly belong

in our Gospel reading today we see Jesus driven into the wilderness; and if you are following the Good Book Club readings you have also seen that John the Baptist also had his important wilderness experience; for both Jesus and John the wilderness was not a place of punishment, nor a place of deprivation for the sake of deprivation; the wilderness was a place of renewal, of re-commitment, of a refocusing of purpose, where Jesus and John both prepared themselves for the more important work to follow; and that's a good way to look at how we approach Lent, using this as a penitential time, yes, but as one that makes use of the more positive aspects of penitence; what can you do during this time of Lent which will help you renew, re-commit, and refocus your life of faith and your relationship to God, to Christ, to the Holy Spirit, and to God's people?; what can you do during this time of Lent which

will help you, in the words of our Baptismal Covenant, “repent and return to the Lord”?

as Episcopalians, we have no official books of doctrine or theology outside of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer; it is in our worship and in our praying together that we express and experience our theology; so I want to be attentive to these differing ways of being penitential, and use the more positive penitential approach in our worship together during Lent

so that means I’m going to make a few small changes; not changes just for the sake of change; not changes in order to get you used to changes before your new Rector arrives; but rather changes for straightforward theological reasons, like this positive approach to penitence that I’ve been discussing; I also want to make a few small changes for the purpose of aligning our worship more closely with the rubrics, the guidelines, given in the *Book of Common Prayer*; those guidelines align our worship with our theology and our beliefs, and I want to make sure that you are aware of the connections between the way we worship and the theology behind it

we started the service today, in recognition of this being the First Sunday in Lent, with the Great Litany; it, like the Ash Wednesday liturgy, is very penitential, and calls upon some of the negative aspects of penitence; but for the remainder of our service today and continuing on throughout Lent ...

[8:00 only] we will continue to use the Rite I service, but I am going to avoid any of the prayers and forms that speak of us being “unworthy,” a concept contrary to what the Bible says; such negative statements in our liturgy were inherited from the very first Book of Common Prayer of 1549, and are more a reflection of the Roman Catholic Church’s theology of that time, which was a highly, and negatively, penitential Medieval theology; we will use the 2nd option for Confession, and the 2nd option for the Eucharistic Prayer, both of which are more positively penitential; I’m also going to let the sanctus bells stay silent for Lent; the simplicity of the season invites more silence, and Easter will feel more celebratory when the bells return

[10:30 only] we will not use Rite I at the 10:30 services, but rather Rite II and Eucharistic Prayer C as the most positively penitential option

I will invite you to stand or kneel following the *Book of Common Prayer* rubrics; these are not my preferences, they are the stated directions given in

the prayer book, and they are identical for both Rite I and Rite II; the rubrics basically follow the pattern that kneeling is for confessional prayer and standing is for praising God and for other kinds of prayer, such as petition; at the start of the service we will remain standing through the Collect of the Day, because that is praise; we will stand for the Creed; for the Prayers of the People, we will stand or kneel; think of standing for petition like you would stand before a judge in a courtroom; at the Confession, we will kneel; for the Eucharistic Prayer, we will stand at the beginning, then after the Sanctus, the “Holy, holy, holy,” stand or kneel, recognizing that Holy Communion can be approached more in penitence or in praise, following your personal preference

[10:30 only] the one exception to this is Eucharistic Prayer C which we will use throughout Lent at this service; it does not give the option for kneeling; the congregation participates in this Eucharistic Prayer in dialogue form with the celebrant, and so it invites the congregation to remain standing for the entire Eucharistic Prayer

standing during the Eucharistic Prayer makes all the congregation co-celebrants, showing that priest, deacon, and people are equally important gathered around the holy table together; if you are used to kneeling for any one of these options, I encourage you to try standing, just to see if it gives you a different worship experience; see if it gives you a different sense that Jesus has “made us worthy to stand” before him; and if standing or kneeling is physically difficult for you, it is OK to sit if you must—God understands

none of these changes are set in stone, and we will try other options at a later time; but I think it is important we experience them together; and I would ask that you give such changes a fair chance, by not making up your mind too quickly about whether you like them or not; a new and unfamiliar way of doing something may take a little time before it becomes familiar; but you’ll never know what it is like unless you try it

this is a beautiful parish with many great traditions; during this interim time we will experience and keep learning about how our particular choices in worship, and in a lot of other things, reflect our theology and beliefs; and we always want to remember that this church home of our is, first and foremost, the house of the Lord; let’s be open to seeing how God may move differently within us as we learn about and experience some new ways of approaching

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