

March 1, 2017  
Ash Wednesday  
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17  
Psalm 103:8-14  
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10  
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

For the last week or so, I have been feeling *tender*. I don't mean sad or anxious or afraid. Just *tender*. This didn't come on instantly; at first I just felt a little off kilter. But after a few days, I noticed that I often felt like crying. At this point, any tale of human travail is likely to make my heart ache.

Over the weekend I pondered how to describe this tender feeling. Into my mind popped the image of a soft shell crab. Apparently my crabby self has had to leave behind her crusty but reliable old shell. Without the usual protections, my delicate insides are exposed to the often indelicate pokings and proddings of the world.

As to why I am *right now* so sensitive to those pokings and proddings, maybe it was because I was sick last week; or maybe because of continuing human and environmental toll of the November elections; or maybe because of the large number of people associated with St. Thomas's who are currently dealing with the death of a close family member. Most likely, each of those things was a factor. But I'm pretty sure that what put me over the top was this: Ash Wednesday was looming.

Yes, Lent just makes me feel tender. This has been true for years; you'd think I would learn to expect it, but it's always a surprise, a stalking cat creeping up on me in the night. And so here we are, suddenly it's Ash Wednesday, I'm feeling vulnerable, and we're in the midst of the year's most unsettling liturgy.

One could argue that Good Friday is even tougher, but I disagree. Good Friday carries brute emotional impact, but it's pretty straightforward with its heavy dose of loss and grief. On the other hand, Ash Wednesday is subtle and nuanced, rather like that hunting feline. Ash Wednesday makes demands of us, as it asks us to both seek and offer forgiveness. Ash Wednesday affects every person differently, because every person brings to it their unique history, a history that they must necessarily wrestle with.

Some of us have trouble with Ash Wednesday because we grew up with the message that we were innately and inescapably sinful, simply because we inhabit our bodies. Yes, personal and institutional sinfulness is real, but I don't believe that sin is the defining essence of our existence. If there is a sin weighing on you, by all means, seek forgiveness. If someone seeks your forgiveness, by all means, offer it if the time is right for you.

But let's also remember that the heart of the issue isn't *sin* and *forgiveness*, at least not exactly. The heart of the matter is separation from the love of God. Sin does have the power to separate us from the love of God. Whether we are the sinner or the one sinned against, penitence and forgiveness can help close that separation. But there are a lot of other things that separate us from God. And so, for me, the bigger question of Lent is this: what is separating me, what is separating you, from the love of God, and what can be done about it?

The liturgical year begins with Advent, the season during which we prepare for the messiah's arrival at Christmas. Next comes the season after the Epiphany, when Jesus' divinity is revealed and its implications explored. Now we have Lent. To put it another way: God is with us, now what? This sweep of Advent to Christmas to Epiphany to Lent kind of reminds me of a marriage: there's preparation, wedding, and honeymoon, and then follows the hard reality of how figuring out how manage everyday life together, while still growing in loving intimacy. It's not easy with another human; it's not easy with God.

God sees us at our worst, like when we wake up in the morning with bad breath and bed head. It's not always pretty. We have a choice: to either rush out of bed and try to sneak off to the bathroom for a shower and makeup before God wakes up, or to just let it all hang out, knowing that God knows, knowing that God loves us even when we have bad breath and bed head. The truth is, we only grow in intimacy when we let our spouse see our bed head and, well, smell our bad breath. It's probably the same with God. We have to let ourselves be vulnerable.

At the start of this homily I mentioned feeling like a soft shell crab. In preparation for this homily, I did some research about crabs and molting. It's pretty interesting. Because the crab exoskeleton is hard, crabs must molt in order to grow. They only grow during the month or so period of time between shells. A king crab will molt 15-20 times in its lifetime, including six times the first year. As they age, male crabs molt less frequently, but female crabs must molt annually for mating. [I'll let you make what you will out of that last part.]<sup>1</sup>

There's more. "Besides allowing the crab to grow, molting helps to get rid of parasites, barnacles, and other animals growing on the shell. It also helps to get rid of shells damaged by bacteria that degrade the chitin in the exoskeleton." And this: "Crabs that have lost legs can regenerate them over time. The leg breaks off at a special joint. Before molting, a new limb bud, with all the remaining leg segments, grows out of the joint. After molting, the new leg is smaller than the others. The crab needs three molts to grow a leg back to its normal size."<sup>2</sup>

I think the molting crab is a pretty good metaphor for Lent. It takes a month for the crab to get its new exoskeleton; for us, maybe the 40 days of Lent is about right. Rather than be surprised by feeling tender, we might even be wise to cultivate it. If we shed our old shells, we can leave behind all sorts of barnacles and bacteria. We could even manage to grow a new limb. We might feel unprotected and vulnerable, at least for a while. A little tenderness might be just what we need to draw closer to God. A little tenderness might be just what the world needs right now.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All crab facts are from Bradley G. Stevens, "Molting: How Crabs Grow," posted on the Alaska Fisheries Science Center page of the Fisheries section of the at NOAA website, available at <https://www.afsc.noaa.gov/Kodiak/shellfish/cultivation/crabGrow.htm> (accessed February 28, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.