

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

MARCH 6, 2022

ROMANS 13:11-14:4

“WHY LENT?”

There was a man who had to take a bus to work every day that lived just a couple of blocks from the bus stop. So he developed the habit of getting up rather late and rushing around his house getting ready---and then almost at the last minute walking quickly to get to his bus just in time. One day he overslept a bit. In a panic, he did the bare minimum to get ready for work---and then ran full speed to the bus stop. He came galloping up as the bus was just pulling away, but the driver stopped for him. He got on, greatly relieved---until he realized he didn't recognize the driver and that none of his usual bus companions were on board. He realized he was on the wrong bus and loudly proclaimed, “By the way, where in the world is this bus going?”. (Father Anthony Coniaris, The Message of the Sunday Gospel Readings, Vol. 1, Light & Life Publishing, p. 139)

Today, we may be a little like that poor fellow. Preparing for a trip---the journey of Lent that begins tomorrow (tonight, really). It's a lot longer than that man's bus ride to work. It's a 40 day bus ride---as we think about it starting, we may be saying to ourselves---“Do I even know where I am going? Where is this Lenten bus headed to?”

Let me tell you very briefly a short history of this Lenten bus.....

The origins of Lent go back to the early days of Christianity when the early believers started setting aside some days to intensely prepare to celebrate the resurrection of Christ at Pascha. It soon expanded into a 40 day time period (God seems to love that particular number!). The English word “Lent” is simply used because this 40 day period is at the time of year when the days are lengthening---“Lent” comes from the word “Lengthen”. At first, most of the focus of Lent was on the catechumens as they were commonly baptized at Pascha---so this was the final part of their often 3-year catechumen period in preparation for baptism. But the whole Church gradually got on board with the special season. And it became for all the Christians a special time to prepare to celebrate the Lord's resurrection by drawing closer to the Lord. Thus, the various Lenten disciplines that we know---more prayer, almsgiving, fasting, extra worship services, going to Confession, more Bible reading....

Of course, we should strive all year long to deepen our walk with God. But Lent is important because of how weak and sinful we are. We need the help of a certain time set aside, of the structure of the season, and how that causes us to all together be focused on strengthening our faith at the same time. And that reminds us that our life as Christians is a life we live together, not just an individual experience.

All year long we hopefully have a slow and steady climb spiritually. But in Lent, we hope to climb more quickly and make some real ongoing progress on this bus ride And that can become the starting point for some additional growth after Lent leading up to the next

Lent.....

So the bus is pulling into your bus stop. Get on board. And take the ride seriously. Don't fritter away the 40 days by doing nothing or just taking a minimal approach. Do a lot, be serious. Don't do a half-way Lent this year.

There is a religious denomination going back to the early 1800's with a very simple name—"The Christian Church". There don't seem to be many parishes in our area, but there are lots in Indiana, Kentucky, and some other states. There is a little town in Missouri called "Halfway". Not much of a place. Just one church in the whole town and that church is part of that "Christian" denomination I just mentioned. So if on your next vacation you drive through Halfway, Missouri you will see that church and you will see the sign out front that gives its name---"Halfway Christian Church". There may be some who think that would be the ideal congregation---just made for halfway Christians! (William Least-Heat Moon, Roads to Quoz: An American Mosey, Back Bay Books, p. 42)

If that name fits us, if we are content to be halfway followers of Christ, then a halfway Lent will work just fine. But don't go just halfway. Go all out this year.

If we are tempted towards a halfway (or even "quarter way") Lent, tempted to just slide through one more year, then this morning's epistle lesson is very relevant to us. St. Paul wrote in Romans 13:11---"you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake up from sleep." Of course, Lent didn't exist yet in St. Paul's time. But his message is perfect for us today. If we are spiritually dozing our way through life, the start of Lent is the perfect time to "wake up from sleep"!

St. John of Gaza, back in the 500's A.D., wrote----"Awaken the Jesus that sleeps inside you." Of course, the Jesus that came to live in you when you were baptized isn't really sleeping! He doesn't need naps. St. John's point was that it is *we*, who are spiritually sleepy, who need to wake up and then turn the Lord loose in our lives. The start of Lent is a good time to do that!

As St. Paul wrote---"it is *full time now* for you to wake up from sleep." And then he went on to write in verse 12---"the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light."

Lent is a good time to decide---Which side do I want to be on? The side of darkness or the side of light? Don't be content with the darkness of sin that is still left in your life. As the Apostle Paul said---"Cast it off!". As Christians we sometimes get way too friendly with our own sins-----Paul says we shouldn't be friendly with our sins, but by God's grace throw them out of our lives.

In the early 1900's in Kentucky, there were not many differences between the policies of the Democratic and Republican parties. This led to lots of friendships between the politicians in the two rival parties. And it led to very friendly campaigns and some strange behaviors. Two men running against each other for an office would sometimes travel together during the election campaign. They would be seen eating together and sometimes even sharing a hotel room to save money! One time at a debate one candidate had a sore throat so the rival candidate presented both his position and the positions of the other fellow!

In the 1916 governor's race, it was Democrat Augustus Stanley versus Republican Edwin Morrow. They were good friends and traveled together to have friendly in-

person debates on the campaign trail. Kentuckians were used to that back then and so didn't think it too terribly odd. But one evening at one of these debates, the crowd got upset as they thought Stanley and Morrow crossed the line. In between speeches at the debate, they would pause and drink some whiskey right on stage. That didn't upset the crowd----after all, this was Kentucky the whiskey state. But when the candidates, getting tipsy, started taking turns guzzling out of the same bottle, the crowd was upset. That was just getting too friendly with each other! (Neal Price, The Border American States, W.W. Norton, p. 229)

How friendly have we gotten with our sins? Stanley and Morrow were way too friendly with each other! We can get used to our sins, tolerant of our sins, too friendly with our own sinfulness.....

Lent is upon us. It is time for us to get unfriendly with our sins, to decide we wish God to rid us of them. God provides the grace for this to happen and we have our role to play as well. As St. Paul said in verse 12, we should "cast off" the works of darkness in our lives. Lent is a tool, a structure given to us by God through His Church, for us to go to war against our sins in an intense way. It starts this evening. Ask God for help, declare war on whatever sins you have....and cast them off!