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February 25, 2020

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“Your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you” (Matt 6:16).

Joel 2:12-18; 2 Cor 5:20—6:2; Matt 6:1-6, 16-18

Christians enter the season of Lent with ashes on their foreheads and the Jewish practices of prayer, almsgiving and fasting. These disciplines are intended to make us attentive to our own mortality, our dependence on God and our responsibility for the poor. Today’s Gospel passage promises a “reward” to those who do not make a show of their piety, because God, “who is hidden, sees what is done in secret will reward you.”

Because this phrase is repeated three times, it warrants our attention. Jesus proposes the three practices common to many religions, including Islam, but adds a reminder that the deeper mystery and the profound “reward” of observing them is that we come to know God in a more intimate way as the One who sees us, who is waiting for us in that interior room of the secret self where our deepest thoughts and motives originate. In prayer we encounter God as the cause of our existence. We exist because God sees us. To pray is to be present to the authenticating moment when God chose us and called us out into being out of nothing, named us and sent us on a trajectory toward eternity. To pray is to acknowledge God as Creator and our own lives as gift.

To reacquaint ourselves with God in this purest of ways is the reward of prayer. To be with God in our secret place is to renew the love that made us and gave us life. We “go to our room,” as parents sometimes send their children, to reflect on who we really are. We emerge again more focused and energized to be our true selves.

Intimacy with God is the purpose of prayer, and it takes us to the wellspring of love that sustains us to re-enter that outer world of noise and the need for approval. Without this face-to-Face encounter with our Creator, we will have nothing authentic, true and beautiful to offer others.

Lent frees us from false selves to be real in our relationships to others, making God present. The Pharisees publicly paraded their temple prayers, philanthropy and long-faced piety, but it was all about them, so they had their reward. A disciple turns inward to God and outward to those in need, moving quietly and graciously through their communities, loving God and neighbor without being noticed. But God sees and comes closer, flowing through us like alms to the needy, multiplying goodness.

Thus, Lent is the time to renew the contemplative and active balance in our lives, resting in God, rising to serve. Faith urges us to trust that our hidden life in Christ is transforming us as we journey with him toward Holy Week and Easter. As Paul reminded the Corinthians: “Behold, now is the acceptable time and now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2).

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