

“Turn Back to the Light”

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Bruton Parish Church – Williamsburg, VA

Ash Wednesday, February 18, 2026

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

“Who is the Jesus that you follow?”

This is the question that Father Bill asked in his first sermon back at the beginning of Advent. “Who is the Jesus that you follow?” Hold that thought.

In 2009, during my first year as a priest, I had the opportunity to be part of a clergy conversation with Katherine Jefferts-Schori who was the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church at the time. She started off by talking about Jesus’ baptism and reminding us of the words we heard at the beginning of Epiphany: “You are my beloved; in you I am well pleased.” She asked us to contrast that with a different message, “I am a miserable sinner.” She said we frequently add on, “and you’re worse.” And then she gave us five minutes of silence and asked us to meditate on those words, “You are my beloved; in you I am well pleased.”

As I sat in the silence, I was amazed at how it can be easier to believe that I’m a miserable sinner, than it is to believe I am beloved of God and that God could be well pleased with me. Or, if I’m not actually dwelling on being a miserable sinner, I focus on how I’m not good enough, as though I need to pray more, give more, DO more to earn God’s love.

And then I began thinking about Lent.

Lent seems to be the season when we remember what miserable sinners we are, not when we consider how we are beloved children of God.

As I sat there in the silence, I began thinking about what sin is. Sin occurs when we turn away from the abundant love of God. God is there all the time, loving us, pleased with us, willing reconciliation with us, and we just keep turning away. All the more reason to contemplate our wretchedness. And isn't that what Lent is for – the time to focus on all the ways we turn away from God and to feel guilty and wretched?

I'm not so sure. In the same year that we had the conversation with Presiding Bishop Katherine, Bishop Eugene Sutton was the guest speaker at the clergy conference. He described God as a bright light in the center of a room. When we face the light, it shines on us, illuminating everything. But when we turn away, our bodies get in the way of the light and we cast a shadow.

Our job is to keep facing the light, to keep our faces turned toward God. But the problem is that it feels backward to us. To keep our faces turned toward the light means that we can't look to see where we're going. We're walking backward, facing the light, and we just can't stand it. We want to turn and look where we're going, to be in control, to find our own way, and in doing so, we turn away from the light; we turn away from God. We don't trust that God will keep us on the path, steering us, caring for us. Instead, we turn away from that steadfast love, that guiding light, and we make our own way.

Or, we turn away because we don't want to face that light that illuminates everything. It's hard to face that much truth about ourselves.

And yet, when we turn away from the light, we forget that we are beloved of God because we can't see God anymore. In order to remember, we have to turn back to the light.

Lent isn't the time to focus on what bad people we are. It's a time to remember that we are the very good creation of God. We make bad choices, sure, and we can always take a good look at the ways we might be hurting one another and ourselves, but that examination should be grounded in love. It's a time to return to the loving God who creates us and redeems us.

And that's where Bill's question comes in: Who is the Jesus you follow?

The Jesus we hear about in the Gospel of Matthew is the Jesus who is baptized by John in the Jordan and hears the words "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

He is the Jesus who has those words in his ears and his heart when he is led into the desert to fast and face temptations. He knows who he is and whose he is.

He is the Jesus who emerged from the desert proclaiming repent, the kingdom of heaven has come near – repent meaning turn.

Turn back to the light.

Turn back to God.

Turn back to the one who loves you and is well pleased with you.

This is the Jesus who says blessed are the poor, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who mourn, those who hunger for righteousness and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

This is the Jesus who says love your neighbor and your enemy, even in this troubled time. This is the Jesus who loved his neighbor and his enemies even in his troubled time. If this is the Jesus we follow, then this is what we do also. As hard as it is, that's the call.

This is the Jesus who says to spend time in prayer with God, not so that others see how well you pray but for your own relationship with God. We might sum it up by saying, Pray, don't perform prayer.

This is the Jesus who says give to those in need, not to make yourself look good, but because you have some of what your neighbor needs. Giving is good for us – we don't need trumpets to announce it.

This is not the Jesus who says you are a miserable sinner, so spend the next six weeks wallowing in guilt and feeling bad about yourself.

This is the Jesus who says you are beloved. He says, spend the next six weeks turning to face the one who loves you. Do things that help you remember. Let go of things that get in the way. Walk with Jesus on this journey – it's not always going to be easy, and it leads to the cross. And that is where new life begins. That's what we're preparing for – Easter. God is holding you through it all, loving you in the midst of all the wretched things going on in the world, longing for you to come bask in the light of his love and to trust that love and to share that love.

This is the Jesus we follow.

Listen to him.