

**SLD03.01.17 Ash Wednesday**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**2 Corinthians 4:14 - 5:9**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“It’s a Process”**

**2 Corinthians 4:14 - 5:9**

...we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. *Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.* For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. *For in this tent we groan,* longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling— if indeed, when we have taken it off we will not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. The One who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please God.

Yet again this evening Emory and Trinity churches join together to begin our Lenten journey of 40 days and 40 nights of reflection, contemplation and confession which will end finally with the long-awaited resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter morning. In preparation, the season of Lent encourages quiet and focused self-examination as we ask ourselves who we really are, as we look boldly at the manner in which we live our lives, the choices we make, the priorities we invest in, and at what’s *really* important to us. And when we do, when we look long and hard at harsh reality, what else can we conclude but that, even while we are beloved creatures of a loving God, at the same time we are an inescapably limited and self-delusional people?

My mom had a needlepoint pillow in her front hall that said 'Old Age Is Not For Sissies.' The older I get, the more I understand just how true this is. "For in this tent we groan," sure enough. A couple weeks ago I got steroid injections at the base of both my thumbs, just so I could move my hands. 'Groan' is a polite way of saying what came out of my mouth at the time. Man, did it hurt like the devil. 'And you can get it as often as you like,' chirped my 12 year old doctor.

It's not like there's no pain in youth, or middle age...later in life? Lord, have mercy. Still, says Paul," we do not lose heart. Because even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day." Ain't *that* good news? If we're on track, the older we get, the more our inner nature gets renewed day by day. And if we're not on track? Well, what Paul leaves out is that, if you're a person of faith, one way or another God'll get you back on it, often by the hardest.

But what does being 'on track' mean? Well, I'd say it has to do with facing and claiming who we really are, and then lining up our truest selves with the will of God. And falling 'off track?' That would be when we fool ourselves about who and how we really are. When we invest too much in our 'false self,' or our 'shadow self,' which is what Franciscan priest Richard Rohr calls "what we refuse to see about ourselves, and what we do not want others to see." (Falling Upward, p.127)

'The more we cultivate and protect a chosen persona, a certain way of presenting ourselves in the world,' says Rohr, 'the more shadow work we have to do. So be especially careful of any idealized role or self-image, like, say, a minister, or a mother, or a moral believer. Because the more we're attached to, and unaware of, such a protected self-image, the more shadow self we'll likely have.' As Jesus put it, "if the lamp within you is, in fact, darkness, what darkness there will be." (Mt. 6:23)

In any case, “by the second half of life,” says Rohr, “we’ve all been in regular unwelcome contact with our shadow selves.” Right? Or, you know, if we haven’t, God’ll see to it that we do.

The way Rohr goes about keeping himself humble is to pray for one good humiliation a day. Me, I get that without even asking. But the trick is to observe how I react to my ‘one good humiliation a day.’ With shame? Embarrassment? Outrage? Yeah, pretty much, given that I hold myself in pretty high regard. Which would be, according to Rohr, my shadow self weighing in, my persona, the one that I most identify with, as well as the one most people want from me. (p. 128)

Yes, when I mess up, no one gives me more grief than myself. Are you like that? Only, when something upsets us and we end up having have a strong emotional reaction out of proportion to the moment, (has this ever happened to you?) well, our shadow self has just been busted. (p.133) This is when we should pay attention, says Rohr. Because spiritual maturity is largely a growth in seeing; and full seeing seems to take most of our lifetime. (p. 130)

Only don’t worry if you miss the moment, because it’s bound to come ‘round again. Life has a way of humbling us and God has a way of picking us back up, after we’ve learned our lesson.

My favorite story to tell on Ash Wednesday is about Eustace, an annoying, petulant, self-referenced young boy in C.S. Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia.<sup>1</sup> Eustace gets on *everyone’s* nerves. At one point during his adventures with his siblings, Eustace wanders away from the group (to get out of work, of course) and comes across a dying dragon. And somehow, the

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<sup>1</sup> The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, C.S. Lewis. HarperCollins Pub., New York, N.Y. 1952. pp. 113-117.

spirit of that dying dragon leaps out of its body and into Eustace's! Suddenly Eustace becomes a dragon himself!

Horrified at this dreadful turn of events, Eustace nevertheless becomes marginally less annoying to the others in his dragon form. Lonesome and marginalized, he begins to seek their company, appreciate small kindnesses, and even pitch in once in a while in his limited, miserably, mega-reptile sort of way.

One night, feeling sorry for himself, Eustace wanders into some nearby woods. When he looks up, what should he see padding slowly toward him but a fierce and enormous lion! Now anyone who's familiar with Narnia (and everyone should be) knows this lion. His name is Aslan and he is Lewis' magnificent and terrifying Christ-figure. Only Eustace doesn't know this yet. All he sees is a very large and very scary lion who leads him to a well on top of a mountain, and commands him to undress. Eustace just stares at him blankly.

"I was just going to say that I couldn't undress because I hadn't any clothes on when suddenly I thought that dragons are snaky sort of things and snakes can shed their skins. Of course," I thought, "*this* is what the lion means." So I start scratching myself and my scales begin coming off all over the place. Then I scratch a little deeper and instead of just scales coming off here and there, my whole skin started peeling off beautifully, ...as if I were a banana. (And) in a minute or two, I just step out of it. I can see it lying there beside me, looking rather nasty. It's really the most lovely feeling. So I start to go down to the well for my bath. But just as I'm going to put my feet in the water, I look down and see that they're all hard and rough and wrinkly and scaly just like before!

"Oh, *that's* all right," I think. "It only means I had another smaller suit on underneath the first one, and I'll have to get out of it too. So I scratch and tear again, and again, and the

underskin peels off beautifully. Out I step and leave it lying beside the other one, and go on down to the well for my bath.

“Well, exactly the same thing happens again! And I think to myself, oh dear, how ever many skins have I got to take off? So I scratch away for the third time and got off a *third* skin, just like the two others, and stepped out of *it*. But as soon as I looked at myself in the water I know it’s been no good.

“Then the lion says – though I don’t really know if it spoke, ‘you will have to let *me* undress you.’ I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat on my back and let him do it.

“The first tear he makes is so deep that I think it has gone into my heart. And when he starts pulling the skin off, it hurts worse than anything I’ve ever felt. The only thing that makes me able to bear it is just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know – if you’ve ever picked the scab of a sore place.

“So Aslan peels the beastly stuff right off- just as I thought I’d done myself the other three times, only *they* hadn’t hurt – and there it is lying on the grass, only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly-looking than the others had been. And there am I, as smooth and soft as a peeled switch, and smaller than I had been.

Then Aslan catches hold of me and throws me into the water, which smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and I start swimming and splashing (and laughing at myself).”

Sure, in this tent some of us groan. And letting Christ peel us wide open is bound to hurt, maybe even more than we think we can endure. But we don’t lose heart. Because when he’s done and catches hold of our smoother, softer, freed-up self, he’ll throw us into the water of new life, which, as my Dad used to say, will ‘hurt so good.’ To the glory of God Amen