

Ash Wednesday—Year C
Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 103:8-14
II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

It doesn't matter when **this day** comes, *we're never ready for it*. It doesn't matter if it comes **shortly after Christmas**, or as late as it can possibly be, like this year, **Ash Wednesday** still crashes upon us like *a wave that knocks us off our feet and sweeps us along while we scramble to get our feet back under us and get some semblance of balance and order restored*. And yet, the **liturgy of this day** is *not just one wave*, but *wave upon wave*. So, just know up front, **this day** is meant to *toss you* around a good bit; **this day** is *meant to unsettle our well-settled world*.

This **service** is a full-contact sport. It involves **marking our bodies with ashes**—taking us all the way back to our **creation from the dust of the earth and our kinship with all created matter** and taking us all the way forward bringing us **face-to-face with our mortality and death**. Not too many of us *willingly contemplate our mortality*—normally, we go kicking and screaming there, and we *only* go there when life has knocked the breath out of us and brought us to the very edge—but **once a year**, we **step forward** and **kneel to remember** that *one day our breath will leave and to dust shall we return*.

This **service** involves *throwing light into the darker corners of our minds and souls* through the **Litany of Penitence**. These things we will **name** and **confess**—no stone will be left unturned. All those things we *try to keep hidden away*—*the curtain will be drawn back*, and they will be **revealed and confessed before God**.

And then, there is the **Church's call to the observance of a holy Lent**, to a **whole season of self-examination and repentance**, by **prayer, fasting, self-denial**, by **reading and meditating on God's holy Word**. Having been laid bare and convicted of so much in this liturgy, we *may be tempted* to **embark upon all of these practices** as if we were **embarking upon a spiritual ironman triathlon**, an **individual act of spiritual endurance** proving our **spiritual worthiness of the forgiveness we yearn to know and feel**, with a **good dose of pride** waiting for us at that **finish-line 40 days from now**. And perhaps **this approach to Lent** is the most **dangerous of all**—it looks like **growing in holiness**, but it's really just seeking an **endorphin high for our ego**. So, our lessons give us some **guardrails** as we embark upon this journey.

First, there is the **clarion call from Isaiah**, reminding us that *any notion that Lent* is *only a matter between my personal, individual soul and my personal, individual God* is anathema. *Sin is never just an individual matter, but always a tearing of the communal fabric*. Isaiah makes clear, all our **fasting and sackcloth and ashes** is a *mockery* if we, as a **nation**, if we, as a **community**, are **serving only our own interests** and **oppressing workers on our fast day**. What kind of fast does God choose? Well, listen to Isaiah: “*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? How about removing the yoke from among you, the pointing*

of the finger, the speaking of evil, offering your food to the hungry and satisfying the needs of the afflicted... *THEN the dark won't be so dark, but it will be full of light.*

Isaiah reminds us that our fasting *isolated from our relationships with our neighbor* won't satisfy our parched places, but tending to the torn fabric of our community makes us like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. This is how our ancient ruins get rebuilt, *not just in our world, but in our souls.* This is how we repair the breach that is *destroying us all.*

Old, old words that we so need for today, for our lives, for our world.

And *just when we might give up, so challenging is Isaiah's call, so challenging is this work of self-examination and repentance, Psalm 103 gives us a resting place, reminding us that the Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness, reminding us that the Lord's mercy is as great as the heavens are high, reminding us that, as far as the east is from the west, well, that's how far God removes our sins from us. Psalm 103 reminds us that God cares for us like a father who can't ever forget his children, who keeps his eye on the horizon looking for that prodigal child to come home.* God knows whereof we are made, God knows we are dusty beyond belief **BECAUSE** it was God who gathered up that precious dust, and shaped it with divine love, and breathed precious life into us to begin with.

And then, Matthew gives us a *whole other set of cautions* we need to heed. The **danger of embarking on any spiritual practice to be praised by others, to be seen by others—this is what the hypocrites do, this is what the pretenders do; it looks spiritual, but it's all just feeding the ego.** The reason we do acts of self-denial is to remember the bigger Self, the True Self, that Self who **has never not been connected to God, that Self that is absolutely beloved by God—always and forever.** Our small self can *never* give us that kind of security.

The ego hates that unassailable security. The ego wants us scrambling for our worthiness, and its hunger for praise and affirmation is insatiable. No, our spiritual practices are **only for the purpose of drawing us more deeply into love with God in the hidden places.** We give alms to remember that all that we have and all that we are is blessing meant to be shared. We pray because **relationships always take time to nurture—the work of communing with another is the slow work of love.** We fast to shed the distractions *and* to remember the things that truly feed our soul. And the more we let go, the more our arms are *free* to answer the lover's embrace of our God.

And Matthew reminds us that *in the end,* it's always a matter of the heart. "*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*"

This day, this Ash Wednesday, this whole season of Lent, it's all about the heart. It's about allowing our heart to be broken because God can't do a daggone thing if we have a hardened heart of stone. It's about owning up to the cracks and bruises and wounds and missing chunks that our hearts have accumulated along life's journey, *so that God can cleanse it and bind up its wounds and heal it with the balm of divine love.* It's about allowing

God to have his way with our heart, to soften it, to massage it, to work with it, and to make it whole once again, and to *give us a new spirit to go with it.*

*Neither today, nor this season of Lent, makes any sense at all, if we don't understand that **God's not out to crush us**, but **God's only desire** is to **woo us** and to **help us remember what it is to fall in love all over again**. *We're not meant for dismal faces*, as **Matthew** so well reminds us, but we are bound for eternal joy.*

Why wouldn't we want to shed everything that's getting in our way of living this life of love and joy?

I wish you a **blessed and holy Lent**. **Make peace with your dust; offer up your broken heart, and let God breathe life and wholeness, love and joy back into it again.**

This is the journey ahead of us in these 40 days of Lent; this is the journey that we are about all of our mortal lives. It is this journey that prepares us for the LOVE that will raise us from the dead. Amen.

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