

We the people of God cross a threshold this day. And I as your pastor, must see to it to help you all mark this as a new beginning. We step intentionally into that which is broken and torn – a space in which we learn to be vulnerable again so that we may journey into the very heart of God. We slow our pace during these 40 days, because the landscape of Lent takes us through the wildernesses of our own hearts and souls. We must walk carefully. We must think deeply. We must allow our hearts to be broken open again, as painful as it may be. We must be willing to lay bare all that is hidden, buried, or repressed. We are pilgrims in this land, looking to God for guidance in the unfamiliar terrain. This is a journey that every Christian must take. We start in ashes and end in a garden teeming with new life and impossible possibility.

Lent is a season that is distinctly, unapologetically counterintuitive. It continues the work that Mary sang in the Magnificat—the world turned upside down—where the lowly are lifted and the mighty are brought down from their thrones. Lent, like Advent (a similar season of preparation for new life), is a turning, an overturning, a re-turning. Both the Joel and 2 Corinthians texts testify to this reorganization of the world under God’s reign. Lent disrupts the conventional wisdom of a world that says we begin in life and end in death. The ashes that we wear on this day are a reminder that death is only the beginning. It is on this day that we, as Christians, declare to the world our intention to die to all those things that keep us entombed – pride, avarice, self-doubt, fear, isolation, cynicism, and every single other barrier that prevents us from living a wholehearted existence with God.

It might seem strange to you all to wear ashes as a sign of new life, but ask any gardener and he/she will tell you that under the right conditions, ashes make great fertilizer. So, we take the ashes from last year's Palm procession and declare to the world our intent to cultivate new life, grounding ourselves in dust and ash with the words, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." This day is our yearly reminder that we are mortal and each moment is precious. These ashes challenge us to be fully human, while also being present with the Divine. Though our Lenten journey begins in ashes, we must remember that it doesn't end there. We must take this season to return to the Holy One who formed us from the dust.

Being fully human, however, is unspeakably difficult. Life is hard. It comes with unwelcome diagnoses, seemingly insurmountable challenges, impossible decisions, systematic injustice, grief, pain, and loss. Is it any wonder then, that we guard our hearts so well from the haunts and hopes of our human existence? Into our messy humanness, into our "sleepless nights," Paul declares that the day of salvation is at hand in 2 Corinthians. Yes, our life is hard, Paul exclaims . . . then there comes a triumphant "and yet . . ." "We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything" (2 Cor. 6:8b-10, emphasis mine). We wear these ashes that mark our mortality, and yet we are on a journey of life. We face situations that break our hearts daily, and yet we declare those hearts belong to

God. We admit that we have strayed from the pathways of righteousness, and yet we profess our repentance and turn toward the good.

The prophet Joel calls out across the millennia, "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing." "Rend your hearts! Break them open! Those walls that you have built around your hearts to keep them safe and comfortable shut me out! Those walls block everything that makes you so delightfully and uniquely human! Remember that you are fearfully and wonderfully made! Turn around; come closer; come home," says our God.

This is the call of Lent. When things seem hopeless, when there is fear and trembling in the land and a day of great darkness descends, and armies are encamped just outside the gates of our well-guarded hearts, that is when the call to return to God becomes most urgent and necessary. To hear and respond to that call takes all of us. Lent is not a solitary journey, but one that must be taken in community, as a community. We cannot leave any heart behind, not the aged ones, not the childlike ones, not the hardened ones, not the broken ones, not the empty ones, not the full ones. Every heart matters to God.

I have written papers on this Joel passage, but reading these ancient words again this year leads me to the verse, "Who knows whether [God] will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him." As we journey together throughout this Lent, I

encourage you all to see the Scriptures as blessings that God has left us, like a trail of breadcrumbs, that lead us back here each Sunday into wholehearted, resurrected lives. Fed and nourished this way, we can endure the wilderness, and yet we anticipate the garden. The Heart of all hearts will not leave us wandering and directionless. Each Sunday there will be a signpost that marks another step toward home, toward Life, toward the rising that takes place once we are brave enough to rend our hearts.

There is an old gospel song that gives me a vision of God sitting on the porch in a rocking chair waiting for us, wayward children that we are, to find our way home again. Through blessing, breadcrumbs, Scripture and ash, the heart of our God is calling, (and we just sang it) “Come home. Come home. You who are weary come home; . . . calling, O sinner, come home!” (UMH 348).¹

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2019-worship-planning-series/march-6-ash-wednesday-year-c/ash-wednesday-2019-year-c-preaching-notes>