

“SIGN POSTS TO HOME”

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Ash Wednesday Service

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

We, as the people of God, cross a threshold today. As we begin this Lenten season, we will be marking this new beginning. We are going to 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 wilderness of our own hearts and souls. We have to walk carefully. We have to think deeply. We have to allow our hearts to be broken open. We have to 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 continues the work that Mary sang about 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 2nd Corinthians texts testify to this reorganization of the world under God’s reign.

Here these words from 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10.

²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

⁶As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ³We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

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, 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 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 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. Though our Lenten journey begins in ashes, we have to remember that it doesn’t end there. We have to take this journey to return to the Holy One who formed us from the dust.

Being fully human, however, is unspeakable difficult. Life is hard. It comes with unwelcome diagnoses, seemingly insurmountable challenges, impossible decisions, injustices, grief, pain, and loss. It is any wonder then, that we guard our hearts so well from the haunts and the 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 imposters, 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 Corinthians 6:b-10)

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.

As we journey through Lent, I want to challenge us to see the Scripture that we use as blessings that God has left us, like a trail of breadcrumbs that lead us 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 break open 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, *“Come home. Come home. You who are weary come home; . . . calling, O sinner, come home!”* (UMH 348)