

Ash Wednesday – March 5, 2025

Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 103; 2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

New Song Episcopal Church – Coralville, IA

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On this Ash Wednesday, we enter the season of Lent. Over these next forty days, we travel with our Lord remembering his journey to the cross.

We place our hope and trust in the promise of his death and resurrection and its power to bring us new life.

With the season of Lent, we enter a time of reflection. As our liturgy for today reminds us, it is a time of acknowledging our need for repentance and God's mercy. We are created to experience joy in communion with God, to love one another, and to live in harmony with creation. But in many ways our relationships, as individuals and as humanity, are broken.

This brokenness separates us from God, our neighbors, and creation, so that we do not enjoy the life our creator intended.

On Ash Wednesday, we, as a community, do something of vital importance.

We quiet ourselves. We look within and confess where we are broken.

We admit to God where we have harmed others and failed to love as Christ has loved us. We acknowledge our complicity in a society and economic system that often benefits us while disadvantaging others.

We confess how we, as humans, are accelerating climate change causing the rest of creation to suffer.

On Ash Wednesday, we name this brokenness in detail. We do so

not to beat ourselves up and declare what terrible people we are. Likewise, we don't name this in a one-time event to be forgiven and then just go back to business as usual. We name our brokenness to receive forgiveness from God. We then, in turn, are invited to join God in bringing the healing that we and the world so desperately need.

This Lent, more than any other Lent that I can remember, it seems of critical importance to name the broken places, to name all the pain that has been brought so keenly to our awareness. We name the broken places

within ourselves, the parts that we hide and don't want others to see.
Our frailty, our insecurities and fears, the darkness within us,
the mistakes we've made, our self-centeredness and apathy,
our lack of courage, our tendency to tear others down or demonize them
in order to feel better about ourselves.

In this particular time, in our nation and the world at large, our government
seems to be intentionally moving towards greater brokenness rather than trying
to prevent or repair it. In our first reading from Isaiah, I see myself as the one
who points the finger and yells in outrage at what "they" are doing.

And what they are doing is pretty terrible. I grieve for what is being broken
and for the many who will suffer because of it.

I shout at my tv and the politicians who have lost their spines
and allowed such cruelty. And I, oh so easily, brand as enemies
those responsible for what's happening
and those who justify their actions. It's all their fault, you see.

The darkness we feel is real; it's palpable. As much as I wish to distance myself,
to separate myself from them and from what they stand for, the truth we know
from Christianity and all spiritual traditions is that we are not separate.

There is a sacred connection between us and all of life. What is in one
is in the whole. What happens to one of us, happens to us all.

And so, my relationship with this brokenness, with this darkness, is far more
complicated than I would like it to be. I can't so easily point my finger.

I can't declare that I am without blemish or spot while they are
horribly wrong. The great spiritual master, Thich Nhat Hahn, speaks
to this in one of his poems entitled, "Please Call Me By My True Names."

Please Call Me By My True Names

Don't say that I will depart tomorrow –
even today I am still arriving.

Look deeply: every second I am arriving
to be a bud on a Spring branch,

to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope.

The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond.
And I am the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.
And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo,
with plenty of power in my hands.
And I am the man who has to pay
his “debt of blood” to my people
dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.

My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names
so I can hear all my cries and my laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart
can be left open,
the door of compassion.

As we begin this season of Lent, we receive an ashen cross on our foreheads.
The ash reminds us of our sins, of our mortality, of how fragile we are.
It too reminds us of how we share in the darkness around us, of how easily
we could be that pirate or those we brand as enemies if we grew up
in the same circumstances, under the same influences.

But this ashen cross also carries additional meaning. It is the emblem,
the ultimate sign, of Jesus’ love for the world. This cross and his journey to it
tells the story of our Lord, of how he interacted with the darkness he faced.
In every moment, in every situation, Jesus responded to the darkness
surrounding him with love.

In love, he spoke truth to those in power urging them to act with justice and compassion. In love, he healed and eased the pain of those who were suffering. In love, he embraced the ostracized and outcast, recognizing their true worth. In love, Jesus didn't condemn those who viciously wronged him, but instead, forgave them, praying that one day their hearts too would be capable of seeing and loving.

This Lent we walk hand in hand with our Lord to face the darkness within us and the darkness of our times. Drawing on our Lord's strength, his courage, his boundless compassion, we aim to love like he did.

Therefore, in love, we too seek to speak out for justice and truth. In love, we reach out to heal and ease the suffering of those who are hurting and are so fearful. In love, we embrace the ostracized and declare them beloved. In love, we forgive those fomenting hatred and cruelty and pray that eventually they can love and see others' true worth. Now, this won't be easy for us by a long shot. And we won't do it perfectly. But it is the task that our Lord calls us to do.

Loving as Jesus loves will change us. I realize that None of this may seem to change the world at large. However, here I borrow from what the writer, Steve Garnaas-Holmes, noted in a recent online post, "The transformations within you are part of a great energy field we apprentices of Jesus call the Holy Spirit, which is the power and grace that heals the world. When you change the note you sing, you change the whole chord.

You are not asked to alter history. But you can join the mending of the world. You are a small stitch in a great tapestry, with the gift to make your place in the world more beautiful, graced, and blessed. You are not alone, but part of a Body more connected than you can see. You are more powerful than you think. And more beloved than you can imagine. We are in this together."

This Lent our Lord invites us to more deeply enter the story of the cross drawn on our foreheads. Together, by God's grace, we can love.

Together we can find strength and encouragement for the journey ahead.

Together we can change the notes we sing and change the whole chord.

May it be so, Lord. May it be so.