

Ash Wednesday
February 10, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Larson
[Joel 2:1-2, 12-17](#)
[Psalm 51:1-17](#)
[2 Corinthians 5:20b--6:10](#)
[Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21](#)

[Click to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

On Ash Wednesday there are a lot of very churchy words. In the readings as well as in the Invitation to Lent and the long Confession of Sin that follows the sermon, we hear a lot about transgressions, repentance, mercy, and forgiveness.

These are words that aren't often a part of daily speech and we can easily keep them at a distance, as things we just hear about at church. When we do engage these words it's often as an intellectual exercise - we think about who receives God's mercy and what forgiveness entails.

- All of that's important, but it's easy for these words to just remain concepts and ideas.
- It's easy for Christianity to become exclusively focused on our thinking and our beliefs.
- Yet Jesus didn't come so that we would believe the right things about God. Jesus came so that we would be reconciled to God and follow the ways of God which lead to life.
- Christianity is about our whole lives, not only our beliefs.

Thankfully, Ash Wednesday doesn't allow words like transgression, repentance and mercy to remain abstract concepts. The readings and rituals of Ash Wednesday offer images and experiences that help flesh out all these important words and ideas, to make them real in our lives. The readings and rituals tonight help us experience the consequences of our sin. Tonight we hear and see that our sin brings darkness and gloom, clouds and thick darkness - like blackness spread upon a mountain, like ashes spread upon our foreheads.

Sin leads to dark days for our world.

Sin causes death for us and for all of creation.

We're reminded of that when a sign of death, ashes, is marked upon our forehead and we're told, "remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

The readings and rituals of Ash Wednesday also help us experience what repentance feels and sounds like.

- We're told to blow a trumpet and sound the alarm about God's judgment.
- We're called to return to God with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.

- We're asked to rend our hearts, to tear them open to God, as we confess the brokenness of our lives because repentance involves a broken and contrite heart.

Tonight we get the sense that repentance isn't just about saying some words. Repentance is about turning to God with our whole selves, returning to God in very tangible, physical ways. And so tonight we repent in physical ways. We sing, we lament, we confess as one body speaking together, we come forward twice, we kneel and humble ourselves, we receive a mark upon our forehead; and in all these ways we turn our whole selves back to God.

Tonight we also get a sense of what forgiveness looks and feels like:

- It's like being purged and cleansed, being thoroughly washed.
- It feels like crushed bones rejoicing again and like being given a new heart.
- It involves our lips being opened so that our mouths can rejoice.
- Forgiveness feels like a great feast of reconciliation with God.

But tonight, we don't rush to forgiveness. When we say the confession in a few minutes there is no absolution, no assurance of forgiveness at the end of it.

That's because we're called to repent during the whole season of Lent. Repentance, it turns out, takes a while. We live so distant from God, so disconnected from the ways God longs for us to live, that it takes a whole season for us to return to God. Repentance also involves practices.

- It isn't just a one-time thing; it isn't just an intellectual exercise.
- Since repentance means turning to God with our whole being, it involves habits, patterns and disciplines that are physical and tangible. We're called to the disciplines of fasting, prayer, giving, service and examination of our lives.

This Lent, at Good Shepherd we will have a particular emphasis on prayer and especially how our five senses can call us to pray.

- This congregation does a marvelous job with the disciplines of giving and serving.
- We do well at examining ourselves, especially in regard to issues of justice and life in the world.
- We fast from much of the consumerism around us so that we can give and serve more freely.
- Certainly we can and should always seek to deepen our disciplines in these areas.

But this Lent, we'll be invited to deepen our discipline of prayer. Prayer can become, for many of us, an intellectual exercise. We wonder how to pray and if we're praying correctly and why to pray and what difference prayer makes. So this Lent we'll be invited to pray with our bodies, to let our five sense call us to prayer - prayer that is more about living with an awareness of God's presence than it is about particular words or formal types of prayer.

For too long, the church has been suspicious of our bodies and has approached them as the root of sin. Yet, the scriptures affirm that God created us good, out of dust, and that God sent

Jesus in the flesh to communicate God's presence with us in ways that we can touch, see, taste, hear and smell. Our scriptures affirm that God wants us to care for our own and others' bodies. In fact, it is our sin that keeps us disconnected from the bodies in which we experience the presence of God.

- Our sin puts us in a fog so that we live unaware of the gifts of God all around us.
- Our sin leads us to overlook the bodies of others and all of creation.
- Our sin drives us to try to keep up appearances, like we hear about in the Gospel reading tonight, rather than to seek whole life transformation
- Our sin causes us to think that we are God rather than remembering that we are bodily creatures with a good and wise creator.

Our sin leaves us out of touch with our bodies and our senses, so it is no wonder that author and pastor Frederick Buechner says that to repent is to come to our senses. To repent is to come to our senses - to come again into our creaturely bodies, into the practices and habits that lead to life, into the care of all bodies and created things.

So this Lent, we will focus on coming to our senses - on letting our senses call us back to God and call us into a life of prayer, a life of awareness of the presence of God who has come in Jesus to reconcile all things to God. On Wednesday nights we will hear stories that highlight the role that each of the five senses played in Jesus' ministry of reconciliation. And in our Lenten devotional we will focus on that sense for an entire week, let it open us to God's presence and remind us to pray.

- For instance, on one of the days in the week when we pay attention to taste, you'll be invited to take notice of all the flavors in your food and then to pray for those who do not have the privilege to worry about what their food tastes like.
- The week that we pay attention to sight, you'll be invited to notice times you can't see clearly during the day. Perhaps there is fog on your windshield or a smudge on your glasses. Let this remind you to pray for God to help you see more clearly.

Tonight, we will focus on coming to our senses as we are touched by a mark upon our forehead, as we taste Jesus' very body and blood given for us. Jesus has come to us in the flesh to bring us back to God. Let's take the journey back together.

Amen.