

“And Again, We Heard the Words...”
Ash Wednesday - March 2, 2022

Please enter into this prayer with me: I will sit quietly with you, in my heart, waiting with you, praying with you, watching with you for the hope you hold to become real. Sometimes there are no more words to say. Sometimes silence is the only companion that you want or need. It does not distract from the focus on what is most important. It does not seek to fill the empty places with a comfort that is too easily expressed to be healing. The quiet can be enough. So, I will sit with you. I will wait with you. Both of us present in a timeless moment, both of us aware we are not alone. Listening into that silence, leaning into it, to reach the love on the other side. Amen.

Just last Sunday, we baptized an adorable and very social Chloe in worship. *And we heard the words.* Later in the service, we blessed eight of our High School Seniors, and we reminded them of the baptismal promises that were made on their behalf; ones they affirmed on the day of their Confirmation. *And we heard the words.* Tonight, once again, we will return - coming back to this rail, where we will kneel down in humility and receive the sign of the cross traced in ashes on our foreheads, and *we will hear the words* - different words - darker words. And yet, the words will somehow comfort us because of the ritual action that will be happening as the words are spoken in very close proximity to our ears. An intimate whisper: *Remember that you are DUST...and into dust you shall return.*

Two years ago, we came to this very rail during Ash Wednesday services - fresh off the high of winning the Super Bowl. We knelt, we heard the words, we listened as Tom and Janelle played traditional hymns, and again, as the Chancel Choir sang special Lenten music during the distribution of communion. *We heard, maybe even felt* the words.

That night, we switched from real bread to small rounds - wafers we call “hosts” - and what an appropriate name for that which conveys “in with and under” them, the body of our precious Lord, our friend, our teacher, our Savior, the host of our banquet. We had no idea what those words and actions would mean in just a few short weeks when we surrendered to something completely different.

Last year, 2021, we came together differently - some broken, some strengthened, some healthy, some grieving - but physically kept apart. That Ash Wednesday was nothing like previous Lents, yet it still **was** (as it always has been) the annual reminder that we are **not** the Creator God, we are **just** the created. We are human. We are mortal. We tend to fail and flounder. We cover up our mistakes and deny our wrong-doings. We make terrible choices. Then we sit with ashes smeared across our fore-heads and pretend that our lives are good, that we are everything we should be and want to be, and that our relationship with God was never better, even as the words were not heard by our whole community, and we didn’t even know who was gone. *And we longed to hear the words.*

In his devotional book - currently being read by a group of our folks and discussed every other Tuesday during Lent - Walter Brueggemann gives us some insight through the title, ***A Way Other Than Your Own***. As I read his words for Ash Wednesday and tried to hear them deeply, this paragraph struck a chord in my pastor’s heart, *“the crisis in the U.S. church has almost nothing to do with being liberal or conservative; it has every-thing to do with giving up on the faith and discipline of our Christian baptism...”* He concludes the devotion, *“Lent is a time to consider again our easy, conventional compromises and see again about discipline, obedience and glad identity...”*

Here is the part I heard loud and clear, *“the crisis in the U.S. church... has everything to do with giving up on the faith and discipline of our Christian baptism...”* And, I might add, that had been happening long before we ever heard the word, **Covid**. So, returning to the *discipline of our Christian baptism* is exactly the opportunity that Lent provides. For the underlying foundation of a

Lenten return to God is child-like, simply being honest; living, intentionally knowing who you really are: *"Dust. And into dust you shall return."* The past year may have damaged your faith life so deeply that you find yourself going through the motions of religion - no longer really believing that it makes much difference to participate in worship online or pray or study virtually. You may have felt there was no connection with your daily behavior, your daily life.

If so, then what Isaiah spoke to his people also has something to say to you. For them religion was a "feel-good" fellowship. They were not really serving God at all, though all the trappings of service to God were there. So, if we are to **really hear** his word for us this night - the Gateway into Lent - then we might need to acknowledge that the word - heard - connects what we do in the world in the name of God, to our own spiritual health. *God's choice of religious devotion* is rooted in the places where we humble ourselves to meet the needs of others rather than just ourselves.

For many, Lent is a very individual journey, a recognition that we are not living the way we would like to live, a confrontation with death. The next words you hear will be *The Invitation to the Discipline of Lent*, which will move us into a corporate Confession that just might cut us to the quick; embarrass us, convict us of those places in our lives where we have grieved the heart of God. But that is part of our return, for it is in this realization - that our actions not only affect the world around us, but God himself - where we can be led to a new experience of God in our own lives - in our own story. The prayer is not an attempt to crush our spirits, but a challenge to ask ourselves to do more for God and less for ourselves.

The disciplines of Lent call us back to our baptismal identity, to a time of emptying ourselves before God as does an infant in someone else's arms. Through repentance and prayer (emptying our hearts to be open to what God would plant there,) Bible study and fasting (emptying our minds and our bodies to be filled with God's word) giving to the poor and needy and serving others (emptying our pockets and purses and closets and storage sheds to give of what we do not need to those whose need is great.)

These are all ways to help guide us into the disciplines of our spiritual work, which is the response that God desires from those whom God has created. But, they are something else as well: they are all ways to give up pieces of power that belong rightfully only to God. So the word of the Lord will be heard.

We hear the words again. **Lent** is our **community's** story which comes out of the ashes. It is a 40-day prayer to answer this question: **"Now that I am confident in my life of faith...is God able to meet the needs of others - through me?"**

May your Lenten prayer empower your life, as you serve the One who gave up **all that he had** - on a cross - so that you might live, **truly** live, again. Amen.

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