

Isaiah 58:1-12

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Matthew 6:1-6

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“The Never-ending Lent**Ash Wednesday – 2.17.2021 – Isaiah 58:1-12; Matt 6:1-6, 18-21**

“A journey,” wrote author James Baldwin, is called that *“because you cannot know what you will discover on the journey, what you will do with what you find, or (what) what you find, will do to you.”* Lent has always been like that for me.

The root word for Lent, which we all know means “Spring,” also includes the idea of “quarantine.” That makes a lot of sense to me, because I have always sort of wondered why we would take a Spring “Journey” into the wilderness of ourselves. The idea of being quarantined for 40 days is a much clearer image for me: Imagine that for the next month or so, we are locked inside ourselves, staying separate and apart (which, by the way, is the definition of “holy.”) In that sense, then, Lent really is a time to reflect, to repent and to be renewed. But perhaps we have become too comfortable with this idea of a forty-day foray into our selves. Perhaps we have lost what it means to actually end up in a different place at the end of the Lenten journey than where we were when we began. Perhaps we have spent too much time on our spiritual “disciplines” as if we could track them on a Fitbit or journal our intake to produce the desired results.

The words I just shared with you began my Ash Wednesday sermon 4 years ago, in 2017. It is an interesting concept, Lent as a journey into the wilderness of ourselves, being quarantined, restricted to life inside, staying separate and apart – holy, as it were – to tend to our spiritual selves. But tonight, I’m thinking “Lent? Who needs Lent? We’ve been stuck in Lent for almost an entire YEAR, only coming up for a tiny gasp of air at Easter, or for the occasional summer Sunday on the Green, or for Christmas...

But, honestly, I do not feel that I need to take a break from my too-busy multi-tasked and overbooked life this time around, because I feel like I’ve been on this wilderness

journey since March 8, 2020, and so have you!

We have been focused on the “traditional” themes of Lent - Remembrance. Repentance. Renewal. for a whole year – I know I’ve **remembered** much about who we were and had always been. I have spent time on my knees in prayer for you, for the sick, for the dying, for our planet, for our country. I have tried to **repent** and become a person of forgiveness, and I intentionally focused on the **renewal** of my mind, and my body and my spirit. I’ll bet you’ve done a fair amount of that kind of internal work as well, maybe for the first time in your life! But now, I just want a time out from this time out. Now I just want to stop thinking about how things used to be and get on with the new life we can see glimmering “just over the next hill”.

Traditionally, Ash Wednesday is a “dusty” day – a time to remember the earth from which you came, to look upon your humble beginnings and remember. Literally, the word humble comes from humus, meaning “earth” - and tonight you have etched a cross of ash or dirt, or cinnamon or oil, and recalled the truth that you came **from** the earth and will return **to** the earth. You traced that cross over the same place where you received the anointing of oil at your baptism – and just as God’s breath moistened the dirt that formed the clay that was molded into us human beings, you were claimed in the water as God’s child forever, and received Holy Spirit breath.

But after last year, with all of its twists and turns and triumphs and trials - The 40 Days of Lent will be unprecedented. Lent 2021 will not be focused on what we can **Remember**, or how well we **Repent**, nor even a call to **Renewal**. Because this year we come to it differently - some broken, some strengthened, some healthy, some grieving. This Ash Wednesday is not 40 Days of “*Becoming a Better You.*” Yet it still **is** (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 dirt or ashes smeared across our foreheads 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.

The underlying foundation of a Lenten return to God is simply being honest, living intentionally knowing who you really are: “**Dust. And into dust you shall return.**” This past year may have affected your faith life so deeply that you find yourself merely 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.

If so, then what the prophet Isaiah spoke to the people of his time also has something to say to us. In modern words, theirs was a “feel-good” religion. 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 today, then we might need to acknowledge that it clearly connects what we do in the world in the name of God, to our own spiritual health. **You see, God’s choice of religious devotion is rooted in the places where we give up power**, and humble ourselves to meet the needs of others.

For many of us, Lent is a very individual journey, a confrontation with death, and a recognition that we are not living the way we would like to live. The prayer litany that we spoke earlier should cut us to the quick; embarrass us, convict us of those places in our lives where we have grieved the heart of God. It is in this realization - that our actions not

only affect the world around us, but God himself – where WE can experience God in our own lives – in our own history. The prayer is not an attempt to crush our spirits, but to challenge us to ask ourselves to do more for God, by doing less for ourselves.

The disciplines of Lent call us to empty ourselves before God: through repentance and prayer (emptying our hearts to be open to what God would plant there,) Bible study and fasting (emptying our minds and 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 us accomplish our spiritual work, which is the desired response from those whom God has created. But they are something else as well: they are all are ways to give up pieces of power that belong rightfully only to God.

And so we begin again. **Lent** is our **communal** story which comes out of the ashes. It is a 40-day prayer to answer this question: "**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.

Pastor Susan Langhauser
Advent Lutheran Church, Olathe, KS
Ash Wednesday 2021