

A Clean Heart

Renewed in Mercy

ASH WEDNESDAY, YEAR A

Though Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of our Lenten journey, we must remember that all long journeys begin not with the first step or rolling down the road, but with preparation.

REFERENCES

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalm 51:17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

COLORS

Purple

The Lenten journey may seem overly familiar. Indeed, we have been here before. There is comfort in the familiar. Many of the rituals and practices of this season are comfortable. They give us a sense of place, like being home again. This can be a good starting place for the season, an invitation to walk the paths we have walked before. We encourage the community to gather once again.

Yet, the Lenten journey and our discipleship path encourage us to grow, to go deeper, to climb higher, to reach further than we may have before. Lent is a time of introspection, but also a call to action as we seek to be the pilgrim people of God, seeking God's kingdom and shaping God's kingdom in worship and in service. This Lent, we invite you to experience the renewal that comes from God's never-ending mercy and then to walk with our Lord on a journey to new life.

PREACHING NOTES

Here we are again. We've managed to make it through another year. And while we come week after week for worship and transformation, on this day, it seems like our hearts are especially in need of cleansing—maybe not because of what we have done, but because we have lived in a messy time and feel as though we have been sullied by the brokenness of which we are a part. We come on this Ash Wednesday, seeking a fresh start or at least a reminder that fresh starts are possible.

There is a solemnity to Ash Wednesday; we cannot deny that. Being reminded of mortality and sinfulness is a heavy word to hear. But it is not given without hope, without a possibility of redemption. We hear the cry of the psalmist with every fiber of our being. "Have mercy on me, O God." Any person of faith has prayed that prayer more than once in their lives. We recognize the weight of our sin; we feel it; we see how it damages our relationships. Even though the psalm says, "Against you, you alone have I sinned" (51:4), we know it is more complex than that. When we say, "As long as no one gets hurt," we woefully misunderstand the interwoven nature of human community; what may seem only a personal sin does erode community in significant ways.

That is why we gather as a community on Ash Wednesday. We come together to acknowledge our humanness and to pledge to join in the Lenten journey of faith. It is a journey of self-examination and corporate commitment to building up the body. Emphasizing both elements is vital for this Lenten experience. Yes, there is the personal, individual commitment to new ways of living, claiming the gift of salvation, accepting the forgiveness of sins, and joining in fellowship with God and community. As a part of the fellowship, then, individuals see their response to God being worked out in the wider body of the church and the world beyond. "Create in me a clean heart," says the psalmist, and then I will teach transgressors your ways and invite sinners (all of us) to return to God. Our salvation, our covenant with God, is not just about the individual, but it ripples out to work with God's Spirit for the transformation of the world.

Paul points this out in the Epistle text. "Be reconciled to God," Paul pleads, but then describes this reconciliation impacting the world around us. Look at the list that begins in chapter 6, verse 4. It begins as another catalog of the suffering Paul has endured for the sake of the gospel, but then it turns into something else. It is an attitude check. The list serves as a measuring rod of faithfulness in a difficult world. Do you hear the invitation in his list? It is no longer about him, but a model for how the clean heart is lived out day by day.

While Paul would never suggest that suffering is a requirement for faith, he does seem to imply that it is a frequent result of this way of living. He talks about treatment and intentionality. He uses the pronoun "we." It's not a royal or editorial "we"; it includes all of us in this kind of life. It is the

consequence, he argues, of getting into “good trouble,” a consequence of loving those called enemies, a consequence of turning the priorities of the world upside down.

Ash Wednesday is also a call to action. We are invited to walk the road that leads to new life, not just for our own sake, but for the sake of the world. We need at least two things to live into this call. First is a sense of community. We need to know that we are in this together, that there is a community that surrounds us and walks with us, works alongside us. This is too much for any of us to shoulder alone. Second, Ash Wednesday reminds us that we need a clean heart, a new and right spirit within us. That is why we are here again.

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