

*Ash Wednesday, 2018 - Sermon Manuscript by Nicki Ridenour  
Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 103:1-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b- 6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 - at Epiphany*

This is the first year that I have ever thought of Ash Wednesday as a launch pad, but that image popped into my head and has been there ever since. And in a way it makes good sense because it launches us into that season where we are invited to reflect on our lives, our deeds and our direction. We are invited to confront “our sins, worthily lamenting them and acknowledging our wretchedness.”

And as a church we present a kind of mixed bag - which frankly makes me smile. Matthew invites us - indeed admonishes us - to wash our faces, and to go about our repentance secretly, so that we may not be seen by others, but by God alone. But most of us go away from church wearing ashes. I can understand why; it’s a way of sharing ourselves, shaming ourselves by publicly acknowledging our sins in front of others...I wonder how often we really think of that as we leave church on Ash Wednesday. If we do, Mathew suggests that that public repentance can lead to pride - and pride in ourselves can lead to more pride. Of course the other possibility is that the ashes routine has become SO routine over the years that we walk out without even thinking about what the ashes mean. And I know that many people regard them as a reminder of the day, the reason and the season.

So what are our good deeds? I’ve always loved the Isaiah passage. “Is such the fast that I (God) choose, a day to humble one’s self? Is it to bow down the head like a bull rush and to lie in sack cloth and ashes. Will you call this a fast day acceptable to the Lord?” Apparently God is not too impressed with us if all we do is walk out of here with ashes on our foreheads. But He does go on tell us what would be an acceptable fast...” to loose the bonds of injustice...let the oppressed go free...” and - to bring it closer to Epiphany lives - “to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house, cover the naked, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted. THEN your light shall break forth like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly. Your vindicator will go before you and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.”

The Jewish Study Bible comments this way: “Real humility toward God would engender a desire for justice toward the weak, compassion for the down-trodden and charity toward the poor. Fasting would involve a willingness to give up one’s own things rather than give up the hope to acquire salvation.” And even if we don’t think about it very often, don’t we long for the burden-free, problem-free, strife-free life we trust Heaven to be? And it is promised to us! Right out of the gate in

the collect we hear “Almighty and everlasting God, You hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent.” I know you have heard this from me before, but our sins are already forgiven. They were forgiven on the cross over 2,000 years ago. But we need to accept the forgiveness in order to have it. If I offer you a gift and you don’t receive it, do you have it? No. And the image of the jail cell works here as well. You are sitting locked in the jail cell of your own sins and without your doing anything, Jesus comes along and opens the door. If you continue to sit in your sins you have not received the forgiveness, but if you get up and walk out, you have.

Psalm 103 says “He forgives all your sins and heals all your infirmities, He redeems your life from the grave and crowns you with mercy and loving kindness...For as the heavens are high above the earth, so is His mercy upon those who fear Him.” We can wrap ourselves in these promises.

2nd Corinthians says, “NOW is the acceptable time; NOW is the day of salvation.” We don’t know what our futures hold, but we do have today to look at our lives, to acknowledge our sins and to ask forgiveness, we have today to reach out to those who might need us, to give and not to count the cost, we have today to look at things in our lives which may be hurting us - through no fault of our own - and to turn them over to God’s loving promise that when we shall cry for help He will say “Hineni” meaning...?... Here I am. Here I am and always will be. And with God as our guide and helper we will be called “repairers of the breach, restorers of streets to live in.”

If and when we receive ashes we will be asked to remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return, but as a father cares for his children, so does the Lord care for those who love Him, for He Himself knows where-of we are made; He remembers that we are but dust. He remembers that we are dust and we are invited to remember that about the people whose lives touch ours and even as we ask forgiveness for our sins, to offer them the grace of our forgiveness.

May this Ash Wednesday launch us into a blessed Lent wherein we draw closer to our God and to each other. Amen.