

Ash Wednesday Sermon

Back in January on Epiphany Sunday during Communion, each of us were invited to select a star word. The purpose of this word was to serve as a guiding word for the year ahead. We were invited to remember our star word often, seeking the ways God might be moving through the meanings and definitions that our star word contained. I must admit that when I received my star word, I was challenged by it and even said to myself, “really God?” My star word is “centering”, and if I am being completely honest here, I will admit that I have a difficult time centering myself due to the busyness of my daily life including working full-time and attending seminary. I also have a difficult time centering myself due to the fact that I am a very active person and love to be doing things like running rather than sitting still... So, sometimes centering myself on God and in the presence of God can be extremely challenging. But during the Season of Lent, we are invited to center ourselves on God and make time and space for God and so I am trying to do a better job of doing this. Lent is a chance for us to practice, every year, focusing on God in Christ.

Lent starts annually with Ash Wednesday. Tonight, is Ash Wednesday when we receive ashes on our hand or forehead and someone says to us, “remember you are dust and to dust you will return.” When we attend an Ash Wednesday worship service and receive the mark of ashes, it provides an opportunity to remember and discuss who we are as God’s children. These words, “remember you are dust and to dust you will return” are a reminder of our origins as people of God. For every story has a beginning. As Christians, our beginning can be found in Genesis, specifically Genesis chapter 2, verse 7. Genesis 2:7 recounts the time in which a human person was breathed on dust and formed by the creator God out of formless soil. God reaches down to form a human being from the dust of the earth and breathes “into his nostrils the breath of life” so that this mere mortal becomes “a living creature.” This reveals that it is only by God’s breath of life described within Genesis 2:7 that we have been formed and created and it is God’s breath that permits the world to have vitality and possibility.

Because of this, there is no self-starting point for any of us and no independent possibility; rather, our very being depends on God as we are created and sustained by the faithful gifts and life-giving breath of our Creator. It is the gift of God’s life-giving breath that we must depend upon for life and fulfillment in order to continue to participate in the ongoing purposes of God.

Furthermore, what belongs to God, God seeks to direct. For God has committed Godself to us - and given to us a sign of that commitment through the cross and Jesus’ death on the cross. We are called during this Lenten season to take upon ourselves the sign of the cross and commit ourselves to God and the way that God’s Son, Jesus Christ has shown us. However, in doing this, we cannot miss the fact that we have “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, so we stand in solidarity before God, acutely aware of our mortality.¹” But this is not the end of our story. The good news is that it is God, not ourselves, who has taken the initiative to set matters right. God’s son, Jesus Christ is the one who, by the grace and mercy of God, has been appointed the agent of our reconciliation with God. So, our sins and our own mortality do not dictate the

¹ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/christianyear/ash-wednesday/>

end of our story as God continually rewrites it from our sin, which is symbolized by the mark of ashes, to experiencing life abundant.

And what better Psalm to illustrate this than the Psalm we just read, Psalm 51, that depicts the Psalmist addressing their sinfulness before God and throwing himself or herself open to God's grace and mercy, making the inclusion of this Scripture Passage for Ash Wednesday almost mandatory. This is because it is on Ash Wednesday that we receive an opportunity to reflect on our sins and to repent, to turn around, to change directions from our sins, so that our story can continue, and we can be raised to new life with Christ.

And this is exactly what the psalmist is doing within Psalm 51. The psalmist is convinced of the manner in which they have offended God and shattered their relationship with God due to their own sins. We see this in Psalm 51 through the set of imperatives that ask God to do for the speaker what the speaker cannot do for their self, which includes removing the stain and shame of their sins. Verses 1 and 2 of Psalm 51 contain four imperatives addressed to God that come across as urgent phrases used by the psalmist to plead for his or her own redemption. These four imperatives include: "Have mercy," "blot out," "wash me thoroughly," and "cleanse me."

Through these imperatives, the psalmist covers the full range of the actions God can take that will bring life, new life in Christ. Thus, the speaker is asking God to make a new life possible. The basis on which the psalmist is bold enough to confess their sins with profound honesty and request repentance and new life is based upon God's *hesed*, which is the Hebrew Term for God's steadfast love and mercy. *Hesed* has a wide range of meanings, but most often describes the grace, mercy, compassion, steadfast love, and faithfulness of God. Because *hesed* expresses essential attributes of God's character and divine being, this list cannot merely convey the true meaning of God's *hesed*. However, the core idea of this Hebrew term, *hesed*, communicates the embodiment of God's grace and loving kindness.

In the psalmist's plea for redemption, it not only highlights God's *hesed*, God's loving kindness and grace, but also acknowledges God's role as our Lord and Savior and the inevitable result of God's intervention, which is a changed, redirected, and transformed life. The primary focus of this Psalm is not on the Psalmist's plea but what comes forth from the plea.

The primary focus is on the change that takes place within the individual as a result of God's redemptive activity. And God's redemptive activity includes God's grace, God's mercy, and God's forgiveness. To be forgiven is to be changed. Thus, our experience of God's grace is what transforms us to experiencing new life in and through Christ. The climax of Psalm 51, found in verse 13-14, supports this as it essentially conveys that when God comes into our lives, our lives will never again be the same.

Psalm 51 reminds us that when God comes into our lives and redeems us from our sins and wrongdoings, we will experience joy and gladness (v. 8, v. 12), a clean heart (v. 10), a willing spirit (v. 12), and an awareness of God's nearness or closeness. For God's salvation accomplished in and through Christ results in a changed and renewed individual like us and the transformation of our story from ashes to abundant life.

God has given us a way out of our predicament of our sins. It is the way of the cross. We must always remember that we are born anew to a living hope through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is a kind of hope that comes to us because of the grace, mercy, and love of God for all God's people. It is a living hope that comes to us because God has taken the initiative on our part and acted in and through Jesus Christ to open the way to new life to all who repent and believe in the good news that Jesus proclaimed. Because of this, our stories do not continue to be marked by ashes or dust, or our own sins, but rather marked by the abundant life that we are promised in and through Christ.

So, if we consider the reality of who we are, where we have been, and where we are going, which are all vital parts of our story, we can be assured that our lives begin and end with God and we remain with Christ forever, despite our sins and wrongdoings.

Parker Palmer, author of a book titled, *Leading From Within: Reflections on Spirituality and Leadership* writes that:

The spiritual gift on the inner journey is the knowledge that death is natural, and that death is not the final word. The spiritual gift is to know that allowing something to die is also allowing new life to emerge. That's the core spiritual insight that can move us beyond our sins and death. (Parker Palmer, *Leading from Within: Reflections on Spirituality and Leadership*, p. 14)

So, in considering how our stories will continue to unfold, we must hold fast to our call to follow Christ who lived, died, and rose from the dead for our salvation so that new life can emerge, new life from the dust and ashes symbolized by our sins to abundant life experienced in and through Christ.

Even though we are mere mortals, we mean so much more than that in God's eyes. Even though we continue to sin and mess up at times, God will continue to care for us and rescue us from our sins. One of my professors from seminary by the name of Dr. Brisson once said,

“I am convinced that the mere mortal standing there before God is the person that despite all wreckage and every glory, is someone who continually stays on God's mind and someone who is continually cared for by God. For no matter how much, we may know about that person, as they remain a sacred mystery, and no matter how many times we mess up, we are known fully only by the God who is paying attention and who cares, and who has made this most clear by becoming flesh, full of grace and truth, and by moving into the neighborhood called humanity.”

Friends, this is good and reassuring news that no matter how many times we sin and mess up, God remains with us and cares for us because of the humility and love of God in the Word becoming flesh. The love of Jesus was made evident as God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through Jesus and experience the fullness of life available in and through Christ. So let us remember, as Dr. Brisson said, that the Word, who is God, became flesh so that

we might know and experience the fullness of Jesus's love and continually be forgiven and brought back into God's fold.

Ashes or dust symbolizing our sins do not claim us or define us or our story; rather, abundance, the abundant and overwhelming love of God and the abundance of God's grace is what claims us and our story so that we can abide with Christ now and forever.

Friends, this is not the end. We can be transformed from ashes to abundance on this great journey of faith, hope, and love, that God has called us to, if we repent and return to Christ.

It is not until we recognize our sins and corruption before God that we receive empowerment from the one who forgives and redeems. For our response to the redeeming love and grace of God should be that which reflects God's character, thus modeling and striving to live out God's mercy, God's love, God's justice, and God's faithfulness within our world today.

It is God who remains in communion with us always and it is through Christ and Christ' death that our sins and mortality are overcome. Therefore, our stories can be characterized from ashes to abundance as Christ provides abundant life.

And in thinking about where your story is headed, I encourage you and challenge you during this Lenten season to rehearse the radical journey of Jesus Christ and ponder the life that you and your community of faith are called to walk. Author Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore offers us a reflection for beginning to do this during the Lenten Season in her book titled, *Teaching as a Sacramental Act*.

Listen now to her words:

Lent is a journey into the unknown,
A journey to the end of what we have known,
A journey where Jesus' words echo:
"The one who would follow me must take up her cross,
Take up his cross, and follow;
The last shall be first, and the first shall be last."

And then Jesus speaks with more than words:
"Where I am going does not promise ease or praise;
It promises hard-walking, love talking, justice-making;
If you are prepared, or even if you are not,
Come and follow me.
I will walk the walk with you,
Provide the love you need,
And journey by your side as you labor, protest,
And give your life for justice."

Lent is a journey into the unknown
A journey to the end of what we have known,
A journey where all are welcomed,
And each is valued,
And all are needed in the repair of broken hearts,
Broken lives, broken communities, and institutions,
Broken ecologies and nations,

A journey where you are welcomed,
You are valued,
You are needed in the holy priesthood of ALL God's people—
The people of God who journey TOGETHER into the unknown with God before and behind us
as we walk. Amen.

This poem reminds us that there is more left to our stories (more to be written) and if our stories are to be described from ashes to abundance, we must live our Jesus' radical ministry and teachings and join Jesus in doing the hard-walking, love talking, and justice-making in our world today with the assurance that God goes before us and will be with us always.

So, let us go forth this day remembering that our stories continue to be written and unfold because of the redeeming grace and love of God in Christ Jesus and strive to live into the blessing that we are called into becoming each and every day.

And as we strive to live into the blessing that we are all called into becoming, let Jesus Christ be your example and guide, and do so with the assurance of these words said by Christ:
Come and follow me.
I will walk the walk with you,
Provide the love you need,
And journey by your side as you labor, protest,
And give your life for justice.

Amen.