

ASH WEDNESDAY 2018 – MEDITATION
“Beautiful Things//Be Careful of the Ashes – They Sting”

GENESIS 3:17-19

And to the man he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

5:20b We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 5:21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 6:1 As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. 6:2 For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! 6:3 We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, 6:4 but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, 6:5 beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; 6:6 by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, 6:7 truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; 6:8 in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 6:9 as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see--we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; 6:10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

6:1 "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. 6:2 "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. 6:3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 6:4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 6:5 "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. 6:6 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. 6:16 "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6:17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 6:18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 6:19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 6:20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 6:21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

A few weeks ago we were riding north on I-95 and on the horizon there was an ominous looking cloud that continued to grow as we drew closer. When we got within a few miles we realized that it wasn't a cloud at all but a pretty hot fire that covered most of the horizon. These days, of course, you just pull out your phone and do a search. We discovered that this wasn't a wildfire, but a controlled burn. Do you know about controlled burns? A fire to help control underbrush that needs to be eliminated so that wildfire doesn't have so much natural fuel to burn. Or for a landscaper the burning away of brushy uncared for areas to make creating a more beautiful space possible, or on the farm to reduce weeds and the residual plant life of former crops to a very helpful source of nutrients found in the ashes. Controlled fires, the production of ashes if you will, lead to better things to come. Burning away the old to make way for the new. Which if you think about it – is the exact reason for Ash Wednesday and Lent.

Controlled burns or any burns you might get close to are not very pleasant. Controlled burns are supposed to be – controlled so as not to get out of hand. You don't want to completely destroy what you're using fire to improve and you certainly don't want wildfire.

And then, there's the smoke and the ash. Smoke and ashes will sting your eyes. Inevitably the smoke and ash will find unprotected eyes and tears would be necessary to cleanse the eye of the unwelcome bit of debris. You

can't burn off a field with your eyes closed. You cannot do what has to be done without looking where you were going. Again, Lent and Ash Wednesday have the same purpose.

Even as last year's Palm fronds are burned to create ashes for our ritual here in this place and we are marked, or imposed with the ash, we are reminded of ancient words, from dust we came and to dust, to ash we will return. And in the ashes of our awareness, our memory, our sinfulness – there come the tears.

Ashes have marked rituals of sadness and regret among God's people for a very long time. In the face of tragedy, loss, regret, suffering and pain ashes represent the reduction of human emotion, so that it can be, like weeds and brush and old dying growth in a field, eradicated and reincorporated into our experience so that new life, new growth, reconciliation can come forth.

Last summer, while we are Montreat we heard, over and over and over, the song "Beautiful Things." I made a mental note and in fact an actual note that I emailed to myself that said, "beautiful things is an ash Wednesday song." I did so because it's about life and pain, and loss, and the question of how all we go through can possibly be redeemed. How it can all be somehow, someday, better.

"All this pain, I wonder if I'll ever find my way. I wonder if my life could really change at all. All this earth, could all that is lost ever be found? Could a

garden come up from this ground at all? And the amazing response is Yes. You, God, make beautiful things, You make beautiful things out of the dust, You make beautiful things, You make beautiful things out of us.

God takes us, works in us, strips away from us that which is old and unusable, that which is hurtful and harmful, that which is to use the language of Lent – our sinfulness – and burns it away. One of the old testament images for God is that of the refiner, who uses heat to separate the pure from the impure. Fire leaves the ashes. The ashes that of course cause tears to come to our eyes.

Even as we sit here in this place, with the ashes of our own living, our own regret, our own sin imposed upon us, the world struggles with the ashes caused by the symbolic fires of hurt and greed and hunger and violence and meanness and pride and hate and prejudice – all of which and more produce ashes that sting the eyes of our concern, our care for a hurting world.

These outward symbols on our foreheads represent the our inner tear producing struggle to deal with our despair, our fear, our anxiety... God wants of us the willingness to take it all and repent of it, to allow God's son to make it all new, all better...

On Ash Wednesday we embrace, if only for a few minutes, the ashes that represent our sin and self and then have demand of us in these moments turned into days ahead of penitence to open our eyes, to make ourselves

vulnerable to the sting of what we see. You can't go to the cross with Jesus with your eyes closed. The prayers of Lent are the opened eyed prayers of people who are willing to see what Jesus sees, who are willing to go where Jesus goes. And there are inevitable tears along the way.

It is called Lent. And we may not like. We're not too fond of fasting because what's left is the bitterness of the ashes on our tongues. Besides they're not there to show off. They're not a badge of honor. They are a reminder. And if the reminder works as it should, along with the ashes come the stinging tears of our regret. And we don't like the sting. So when we leave here we'll pretty quickly wash our faces. We'll wash the tears from our eyes. Which, if you think about it is what Lent is meant for. In ancient days, sinners came to admitted to the church and for the 40 days of lent they scrubbed and scrubbed, they repented and believed and on Easter morning they were washed one more time in the water of Baptism, only to hear, on that morning that baptism was only a part of the story. So try as we might, scrub as we might, life is life and sin is sin and we are sinners and pretty soon we come to the conclusion, to the knowledge, that if we are going to become beautiful things -- then we'll need to be cleansed, renewed, made whole and saved in a way that ultimately we cannot control. We can't burn it away. We can't wash it away. This is something God must do in us.

Again, a note I made last summer listening to the song – which says.

All around Hope is springing up from this old ground. Out of chaos life is being found in You. Do you know what the word Lent means in the old language. It is pronounced 'lecten' and it means 'spring' as in spring time, as in new growth, as in lengthening days of realization and repentance and tears that bring about a new me. The song says,

*You make me new, You are making me new You make me new,
You are making me new, You are making me new.*

So as we do what we must do, what we need to do, so that new life and new growth can come where there is only sorrow, with Paul, We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! See now it's Lent.

So, even in the face of despair, we do not despair. Even as we see the world through our tears with the sting of the ashes in our eyes, we do not lose hope as those who do not believe. We know the one who calls us to follow. We know the one who goes forth to die for us, so that these ashes might be taken from us. Keep the faith, trust in God. Be careful of the ashes, they sting, but not forever. Amen.