

Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 103:8-14
2 Corinthians 5:20B-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
March 2, 2022
The Rev. Karen Haig

Let The Journey Begin

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them...

Strange. Today is the one day in the Christian year when our piety is clearly visible to everyone we encounter, if we don't wipe the ashes off our foreheads before we leave church. In Jesus' day, people wouldn't have been at all embarrassed to wear their piety on their foreheads... or anywhere else. Piety and religion in the first century Mediterranean world were not only acceptable, they were also ostentatious. As strange as it sounds to 21st century Episcopalians, in the first century world, everybody wanted everybody else to know what large sums they were putting into the temple coffers! In fact, if you put enough money in, the trumpets would blast, announcing your generosity.

Anyone want to stand up and shout out the amount of their pledge?
I'm sure Paul could come up with a trumpeter.

For people in our time, somehow, it's ok to be on the "Founders" or "Directors" or "Choreographers" list at the ballet, but at church we'd sooner die than talk about how much we give. Why do you suppose that is?

Ostentation these days is mostly displayed in cars or houses or clothes or grown-up toys or even charitable contributions. In Jesus' day it was money given in the temple. But then or now, Jesus' words apply... *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven..."*.

We've all heard those words before – where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. And it's easy to get pretty esoteric about that. But Jesus wasn't so much esoteric as he was pragmatic. I don't think he meant that we should spend our time contemplating all things spiritual and heavenly, leaving earthly things alone. Jesus was the incarnation of God, and his attention was on glorifying God and uplifting God's people. If we look to him for the pattern of our lives, we will necessarily find ourselves constantly engaging the earthly issues of working for justice and peace and sharing God's grace and love and mercy. To store up our treasure in heaven is not to be heady and passive, quite the contrary. It is to focus ourselves on doing God's good work in the world because we are the face of Christ in the world. Jesus wants us to set our hearts on heavenly things because that really is the only way we will ever be satisfied. We don't

need to worry about being successful – we need only be faithful. We don't need to worry about whether other people think we are important; their ways are not God's ways. We don't need to worry about whether anyone is paying attention to us. God is paying attention to us.

While at first glance “not practicing our piety in public” seemed like a crazy thing to say on the day we etch ashy crosses on our foreheads, it really is the perfect thing for us today. Everything we have and even everything we are, will someday all be dust, no matter how much or little of it there is. Ashes are just ashes. Dust is just dust. And when we are reduced to ashes and dust, no one will care how big the pile is. That, my dears, is the gift of Ash Wednesday. On Ash Wednesday we are reminded that the stuff of this life is only stuff and it isn't all there is. That comes as a great relief to me. The ashes help us remember that we are but dust. That we are mortal. That God is God, that we are not.

Remembering that we are dust helps us to know that while we have all been uniquely created and gifted, in God's eyes we are all just beautiful, messy human beings who are all beloved and very, very mortal. There's a lot of discomfort with the reality of mortality. But on Ash Wednesday no matter who we are or what we have, we all hear the same message. We are mortal, and today that is the only thing we need to be thinking about. When Jesus said “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...” I think what he was trying to tell us is that we probably will actually get what we say we want. If what we want is the trumpet blast, the big house, or the great gig, that's probably what we will get, because that is what we've set our hearts on. But if what we want is a life deeply steeped in God, if what we want is justice and peace and mercy for all God's people, then we will have to give up the notion that we are somehow in charge of things. While it isn't easy to recognize our mortality, there is a great gift in that ultimate surrender, because the more we surrender, the freer we are to let God work on us and in us.

In a few minutes, I will invite you into the observance of a Holy Lent, which will likely mean something different for each one of you. But the key for all of us, is observance. The church year gives us everything we need if we give over to it, and Lent is rich and reflective and not to be missed. At our house, there are more candles and less noise. There is more reading and less cooking. There are more prayers and fewer movies. There is more attention and less distraction. It's a time of turning inward, a time to reflect on our lives and the choices we make, to repent and return to God.

Lent is not a time for self-criticism. Everything we do in Lent is for the purpose of living richer, fuller lives. In Lent we're offered encouragement to fast and to give and to pray and to explore the many things we do to keep God at a distance. We spend more time looking inward, trusting that what we will find will bring us closer to God. The season of Lent gives us everything we

need to set our busyness, our fears, and our anxieties aside so that God can come closer and closer. Fasting and praying and giving and working for justice and peace and love in the world – this is the stuff that will fill our souls. These are the ways we store up our treasures in heaven.

Some people take something on for Lent, some people give something up. The ancient practice of fasting is not deprivation for deprivation's sake or suffering for the sake of suffering. To fast is to remind ourselves that everything we have is gift from God and if we are honest, we recognize that we are utterly dependent on God for absolutely everything... even our very life-breath. We fast in order to be transformed so we can help transform the world. If you want to know the true gift of fasting, try fasting from negativity or anger or suffering or self-criticism. While it's true that diminishing negativity, anger, suffering and criticism will indeed make a difference in the world, it also makes a difference in us. Like Jesus says, fasting is for you and for God. Let it be a gift.

Some people take on a particular practice in Lent. Praying at mostly the same time, in mostly the same place, in mostly the same way each day is a very good way to hear the still small voice of God. There are many different prayer practices - walking the labyrinth, journaling, saying the daily office, drawing, centering silence, praying the stations of the cross... any of which might bring us closer to God and to the ones we pray for, and giving us strength to do the work we're given to do. Our praying is for the life of the world, yes. But it is also for us. Bask in your prayer, Jesus says. It's for you and for God. Let it be a gift.

Almsgiving is another ancient Lenten practice. We don't use the word "alms" very much anymore, but it refers to the money people give to the church so the church can rightly, justly, and mercifully use that money for the greater good. When we give from the depths of our beings, it's because we've recognized that we are merely stewards of God's good gifts, gifts that have been given for the life of the whole world, not just for ourselves. This sort of giving fills us with the joy of taking our essential place in the Body of Christ. Yes, the giving matters deeply to the life of the world, but it matters just as deeply for our own lives. Delight in your giving, Jesus says. It's for you and for God. Let it be a gift.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. These are the words that invite us into a Holy Lent. In the ashes and dust that remind us of our mortality, we find the beginning of our Lenten journey. To remember we are dust is to understand that we can stop the self-absorption of worrying about how we look or what we have or how together we are or aren't. If we can just let ourselves be dust, and let God be God, we will have everything we need to welcome in a Holy Lent. We have 40 long luxurious days to practice. Let the journey begin. Amen.