

Straight from the "Hart"

Special Installment - March 2, 2022

Ash Wednesday Worship Service



Welcome Good evening, I am glad you have come here or online to enter the 2022 Lenten season. The bulletin has some background information on the traditions of Lent and on Ash Wednesday. I'll simply add that to that information by briefly stating that one of the reasons we observe Lent with its suggested disciplines (which can take on many forms) is that it enables us to better feel what Jesus felt as he moved toward the cross, so that we can empathize with him a little better and it draws us closer to him. And it teaches us by practical experience a self-mastery over our lives that empowers us to more successfully navigate against temptation and toward our God-given goals. We'll talk about that a little later.

Opening Prayer Let's begin with prayer. O merciful Father, in compassion, you sent your Son Jesus Christ to the world to save us from sin's power. Grant us the conscience to feel and to lament over humanity's sinful rebellion that made it necessary for Christ to suffer and die at human hands. Grace us with a true longing to be free from sin, made possible by the deliverance won by Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, that he won on the cross for us. For this season, we ask you to guide us to times of prayer and study, to choose the right practices of self-denial and spiritual disciplines through which you equip us to die to sin and be reborn to an abundant and eternal life. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Call to Lent It seems just yesterday we were celebrating Christmas and then New Year's, and then Valentine's Day, and yesterday was Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday -- that day that *traditionally*, people used up all the sugars and fats and yeasts, (depending upon the traditions to what was given up). They'd clean it out of the house because they would not be using it (or tempted by it) during the Lenten season. Now it seems it has become more of an excuse to go out and get all of that stuff, and purchase additional sweets and hold parties, and all the rest.

But tonight, we have arrived at Ash Wednesday, a day which is designed to remind us how fragile life is, and therefore to make the most of each day. To remind ourselves that we are God's children and to draw closer to the God we serve

(sometimes through some act of self-denial) -- kind of like a New Year's resolution -- but with a little more intentional spiritual involvement in it -- to build something into our lives, or remove something from our lives -- at least until Easter, so that instead of those activities, or lack of activities, mastering us, we are freed to have more mastery over them because we have disciplined ourselves around those activities, and then by extension, more mastery over more of our lives (better discipline in one area breeds better discipline in other areas) -- that we become more disciplined and better people. So, Ash Wednesday may be a time of prayerfully deciding what we are going to do (or not do) for Lent.

As I've already hinted, I recognize that time flies by -- it seems all we can do is manage to cram all our duties and obligations into our day and so little more than that. Lent is a time to deliberately seek to somehow slow down and ensure our connection with God. That is why the emphasis of this Lenten Season will be on developing a rock-solid relationship with him, because, as his children who will excel in faith and life, we can do that only as we lean on him and grow in our relationship with him, and it is the only way we will grow our lives as well.

Let's sing about the call of Lent and our desire set aside hindrances and distractions and commit ourselves to answer his call to grow in God and for God... because that is what makes us the best people we can be...



Hymn (vv 1,3,4,5) Jesus Calls Us

Meditation If you were here last Sunday, Transfiguration Sunday. We are entering into a new season and a new series. This night is kind of a link that pulls the two series together. If you were here last Sunday, you may remember that Jesus and his disciples were reaching the peak of their ministry on earth. Even the disciples were healing and teaching with such power that people were beginning to think Jesus was a prophet, or Elijah or even the resurrected John the Baptist. But they were not only gaining positive popularity among gathering crowds; they were also now beginning to capture the negative attention of Herod (and the Roman government), and the religious leaders whose opposing ideas and practices were becoming more controversial and confrontational. Jesus welcomed, taught,

healed, and then fed an unexpected crowd before withdrawing with his disciples the “tumult” of ministry -- where Peter correctly answers Jesus question by saying Jesus is God’s king -- chosen to save his people. To put that in popular lore (as we did last week), he would be the untouchable victorious white knight riding in on a white --- is it a white knight on a horse, a knight on a white horse, or a white knight on a white horse? Whichever way you want to envision that! He brings us every hope and overcoming every problem. But then Jesus tells them that that salvation is going to come through his death. Peter argues. Jesus says not only he, but we all will need to take up our cross and follow him. It is about a week later that Jesus takes what is often referred to as Jesus’ inner circle, his closest three disciples, (Peter, James, and John) up into the mountain to pray -- and we learned that at least one of the reasons was that even though Peter gave the correct answer about who Jesus is -- there is a difference between knowing something or someone and truly experiencing something or someone in all of their glory -- and for what they are about to face, they were going to need that more powerful experience. And that experience is what they received. Along with an additional affirmation that they needed to listen to Jesus -- that the plan of death was indeed God’s plan and they needed to listen more carefully to what Jesus was telling them about that plan.



It is true that they still scattered, denied, and hid in fear, but I suspect it is at least in part because of this experience of the inner circle on that mountain that they were still staying together as a group when they hid from the Roman and religious authorities, and when Jesus finally came to them after his resurrection, and they were all together.

I also believe that although they are different than those of the disciples, it is our personal encounters with God, with Jesus, with the Holy Spirit that helps us hang on and or come back when we face challenging situations in our lives. Sunday, we talked about a handful of ways we may gain those experiences of closeness where we can better experience Jesus for who he is -- building our trust in his strength for us. One thing that was implied but not stated was that we can draw close to him through the rituals of the church and especially through Communion. Join me in a responsive reading.

Communion

Responsive Reading (L - Leader, C - Congregation)

L: We await our Savior. We gather on the mountain and with open eyes, we behold him.

C: We receive strength to live in the valley.

L: God's love is revealed in the face of Christ. We behold his glory.

C: His splendor does not fade. The power of his love does not diminish.

L: The gift of God has been revealed to us: God's Son, the Chosen One.

C: We listen and worship, for Christ is here.

Prayer Let's pray. Lord, we have arranged our day and priorities to gather here under your presence...For the sake of your unfailing grace, do not fail to disappoint --- just as the disciples needed and received a new vision to experience you more fully; open the eyes of our hearts tonight to experience you and your truth in new and inspiring ways, in Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Invitation Not only is Christ here, he is also the head of the church, and our Communion... and he invites all of us to participate as long as we are willing to repent of our sin and strive to follow after him by living in pursuit of peace with God and with his creation. Let's prepare our hearts by a time of confession.

Confession O God, you are the source that makes all life possible, the giver that makes life good. We see it on the mountain, but we also confess --- how quickly we forget to be thankful, how quickly we take you for granted, how quickly we act like sponges, absorbing all you given but then hoarding it to ourselves. We desire to bask in the light of your glory, but fail to live in light of your will. We fail to praise you when things are well and are quick to grumble and complain when the darkness surrounds us. We almost enjoy festering in our hurts, our angers, our disappointments in others and in ourselves. Help us not to mull over our past failures and disappointments except to learn from them so that we do not repeat its mistakes. Also, help us to avoid new evils that can mislead and destroy. Help us to put our trust in your guiding grace and power. Accept and receive us by the grace of Jesus Christ who died for us.

Assurance As we confess, heal us with your tender touch, cleanse us of unclean thoughts, open our eyes wide to the power of your love, the grace of unselfish sacrifice, and the depth of the forgiveness you offer us and instruct us to offer to others. Bless us that we may come to grow in love for each other and for you and

your Spirit descends upon and in us once again... Continuing in a spirit of prayer, let's sing Breathe on Me Breath of God...

Hymn of Preparation Breathe on Me

The Great Thanksgiving (Congregation joins in on bold font)

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts. **We lift them up to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

You brought all things into being and called them good. From the dust of the earth you formed us into your image and breathed into us the breath of life.

When we turned away, and our love failed, your love remained steadfast. When rain fell upon the earth for forty days and forty nights, you bore up the ark on the waters, saved Noah and his family, and made covenant with every living creature on earth. When you led your people to Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights, you gave us your commandments and made us your covenant people.

When your people forsook your covenant, your prophet Elijah fasted for forty days and forty nights; and on your holy mountain, he heard your still small voice. And so, with your people on earth and all the company of heaven, we praise your name and join their unending hymn:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

Holy are you, and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ. When you gave him to save us from our sin, your Spirit led him into the wilderness, where he fasted forty days and forty nights to prepare for his ministry. When he suffered and died on a cross for our sin, you raised him to life, presented him alive to the apostles during forty days, and exalted him at your right hand. By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection you gave birth to your Church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit. Now, when we your people prepare for the yearly feast of Easter, you lead us to repentance for sin and the cleansing of our hearts, that during these forty days of Lent we may be gifted and graced to reaffirm the covenant you made with us through Christ.

And so, in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ, we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving, as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us, as we proclaim the mystery of faith.

Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.

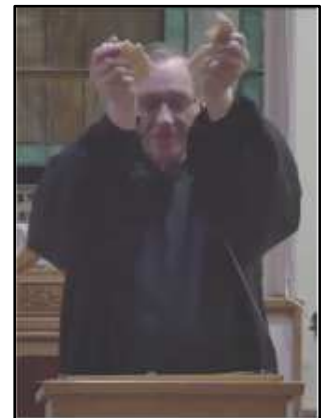
Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and cup. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.

By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet. Through your Son Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy Church, all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father God, now and forever. **Amen.** And now, with the confidence of the children of God, let us pray together: **Lord's Prayer**

Receiving the Bread and Cup

On the night he was betrayed, in which Jesus gave himself up for us; after gathering his disciples into an upper room, he took bread, lifted it up and he gave thanks, and he broke it, gave it to his disciples, and said: "Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." [Take and eat]

When the supper was over, he took the cup, he lifted it up and gave thanks, and he gave it to his disciples, and said: " this is the blood, my blood, of the new covenant, which is she for the forgiveness of sins. As often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." [Take and Drink]



We've been saying that the close encounters with Jesus prepares us, as it prepared the disciples for disappointments and unexpected, overwhelming challenges that were about to face them. Those challenges came even faster than they might have realized. From that mountain high experience, it was --

Bible Reading Luke 6:37-46

-- The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him. A man in the crowd called out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not." "O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with

you and put up with you? Bring your son here." Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the evil spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God. While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men." But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it. An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. (NIV)

Jesus doesn't just call us into the mountain, he also calls us into the valley. We introduced this song a few weeks ago, I didn't want us to get too far away from it lest we forget it. It also fits in very nicely with what we are doing tonight. Let's sing The Summons.

Hymn (vv 1,4,5) The Summons

Will you come and follow me if I but call you name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known,
Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind if I but call you name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare should you life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.
In your company I'll go where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.

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Meditation Called to be Established

Well, it certainly didn't take long for our mountain top experience to take a nasty turn. Almost immediately, actually, even while they were still on the mountain, Jesus and his followers were no longer seen as the invincible knights that could conquer every challenge for anyone who was hurting. Nor then, were they seen as the ones who could offer bliss - an answer to every goal and hope and every

warm fuzzy that they wanted as well.

The mark of a true God-given mountain top experience is not what we feel when we are up on the mountain, but how it changes us as we go back to the valleys, how we live the next day. The mountain top experience is not about being on top (the ones in power and in control) of the world -- it has to do with a radical transformation that happens within each of us in the midst of our daily cross bearing... and ushering that transformation into the deep valleys, the dark places, the hard places of our lives, and the hard places of our world...

And suddenly the whole nature of God's kingdom is upside down from what we thought and hoped... We wanted answers to all our problems and to receive all the things we wanted, and now we learn that we are supposed to give all that away instead. We thought our job was to set up camp in the heights and wait for people to stumble and bumble their way out of the dark up to us on the "enlightened" mountain top, or if we are more assertive, we go down and invite them to get up there with us in the sunny lightness that is above all the clouds of life.

And while some Bible metaphors support this in some ways, tonight's text tells us that the mountain top is not where we escape, but where we are prepared and strengthened and inspired to confidently live and love others in the uncertainty of life's dark valleys... We visit the mountain, but we inhabit the valley, where it seems we can't even accomplish a simple exorcism or make a dent against the forces of evil. Where it feels like God isn't and everyone is asking why and how come? If it weren't for the clear vision on the mountain, we too might be filled with doubts and overwhelmed by the same questions. Jesus, are you really him? Is this really the plan? Is this what it is supposed to be like?

But we, (hopefully), are making time and space for prayer and reflection, and we too can become fully awake to who Jesus is and what he is about and where we are going with him. Because of vision, because of listening to Him in prayer, doubts are swept away -- not necessarily overnight, and not necessarily permanently, but they are being swept away; and with confidence, we faithfully move back into the valley where we are called to bring a light - and in God's time and in God's way -- the darkness will retreat from the light - and it will continue to be cast out -- restoration and renewal will happen, hope, peace, love, and joy will flow, justice will roll like river, rightness like a never-ending stream....

To put it in a nutshell -- so often we see the mountain top experience as the light at the end of the tunnel -- the ultimate conclusion to our tiresome journey through

the dark, the end of our spiritual quest, never realizing we are called to do more than burst through to the light on the top of the mountain above the clouds hiding the brightness of the Son of God.

But here -- the dark valley, "the tunnel" follows the light of the mountaintop, almost instantly. Christ is calling us to be his light at the end of other people's tunnels, making a positive difference in their dark periods of life. For that we have to go into the tunnel, just as Christ went into the valley and delivered a boy out of the dark (the kingdom of evil) and into the light (the heavenly kingdom) - giving all those in the valley a glimpse of the mountaintop experience right there in the valley: "This is the one all history has been waiting for, here is God's man, God's chosen one, here is God. Here in the dark valley, a light has dawned."

Or as Luke puts it more simply: "They were all amazed at the glory of God and marveling at what Jesus did." And amid that mountain top experience down in the valley -- Jesus again warns his disciples -- "Listen to me carefully. Remember when we were up on the mountain and the voice was heard, "Listen to him!" Now Jesus is saying for himself, "Listen to me carefully, the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men" After the grand experience, the voice in the cloud, now Jesus -- both saying -- "Listen, listen, listen!" What happened on the mountain is now happening in the valley. Let me make it clear (Jesus is saying): Your exodus, your salvation, is going to involve a betrayal of your knight into the hands of men, where he will be crucified, dead and buried...

Luke concludes that they didn't get it and were afraid to even ask about it. Why? Because usually people don't want to ask the question if they are afraid of what the answer might be. Right? And they didn't want to hear that. In fact, they went right on to start arguing about who was the going to be the greatest in this glorious kingdom. They were still on a totally different page.

But what about us? Can we listen to Him who spoke of sacrifice, death, and service, and who calls us to follow his example? To spend less time basking in his glory, but inspired by that glory, offering the light of his glory to others by tending to their needs in humble service in the dark places of their lives?

We need to stop waiting for something "significant" to happen (some mystical mountain top experience that will miraculously change the course of current events) and instead begin noticing what is already happening all around us in the valley -- the spattering of rays of light that are shining all around us. It may not always seem like it, but God's mountain top experience is breaking into the valley

more every day. With confidence built upon this glorious vision of the soon to be suffering Messiah, let's use the gifts he has given us to humbly work at fulfilling his vision for each of us. Among other things, receiving the ashes begins the season of renewed commitment to keep moving forward in Christian maturity, in loving service of God and others as we take up our cross and follow him. Let's prepare ourselves for the ashes...

Preparing for the Ashes

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: the early Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church that before the Easter celebration there should be a forty-day season of spiritual preparation. It is a time in which we recall the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the need we all have to renew our faith.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to observe a holy Lent: To make a right beginning of repentance before our Creator and Redeemer; by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, and fasting, and self-denial -- whatever disciplines are going to fit for you this year; by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word -- so that our relationship will be established even more rock solid than it has been before. Join me on the responsive prayer.

Responsive Prayer (L - Leader, C - with Congregation)

L: Oh God, we are reminded this day of how fragile is life.

C: We are dust and to dust we will return.

L: It is by your Spirit and your power that we are given life.

C: You are the source of all hope and life.

L: We now enter a season of repentance.

C: That we may turn from selfishness.

L: We set aside some comforts

C: That we may turn our attention to Your holiness.

L: We mourn the profound disconnection from You that happened at the dawn of humankind.

C: Bring us back into Your presence.

L: We rejoice in the perfect work of Christ on earth.

C: Christ reconciles us to You.

L: Prepare our hearts, Oh God, for Resurrection life.

C: You bring beauty from ashes.

L: Prepare our hearts for the joy of Your coming.

C: You bring gladness from mourning.

L: Prepare our hearts for the fullness of Your presence.

C: You bring forth praise from despair. (by Fran Pratt, slightly adapted)

Prayer Then continuing to pray, Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth. Grant that these ashes (symbols of asses) may be to us a sign of our mortality and our penitence, so that we may remember that only by your gracious gift of Jesus Christ are we given everlasting life. You do not desire the death of sinners but that we all turn from wickedness and live. By receiving the mark of ashes, we proclaim that we crave your presence, your strength, your protection, and that in yielding to you in repentance, we desire your forgiveness and restoration by the Holy Spirit to newness of life. A newness of life that is not kept to ourselves, but becomes a light that is to be shared with all who cross our path. A sharing that sometimes requires us to deny ourselves and pick up our cross as we follow Jesus both onto the mountains and into the valleys of life -- not only ours, but others as well. And it is in his name that we pray, Amen.

Receiving the Ashes

Place the black (ashen) cross on a symbol on your hand in whatever position will work best for you and apply the cross to you skin and hold it -- hanging on to the cross, as we sing our final hymn - we sing about answering his call on our life..

Closing Hymn Here I Am, Lord

Closing Prayer

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, the all-holy one, who gives us life and all things. As we go about our lives, do not let the press of our duties and activities lead us to forget your presence and your love... in this holy season, help us to turn our minds and hearts to you or back to you. Lead us into sincere repentance and renew our lives with your grace. Help us to remember that we are mortal, and sinners, but even more, help us to remember your loving mercy. May these "ashen" crosses with which we have been marked remind us and those we meet that we belong to



your Son. May our worship and prayer and penitence this day be sustained throughout these 40 days of Lent.

(ad. from [St. Albert the Great Catholic Parish](#). via re-worship.blogspot.com)

Closing Blessing

Now let us walk in the light of the Lord, that he may teach us his ways and walk his paths on the mountain and in the valley -- always ready to listen and respond to the call of his Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. — Amen.