

## ASH WEDNESDAY SERMON

For Where Your Treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Matthew 6 1-6, 16-21

The word “Lent” means “long spring days.” It commemorates the forty days Jesus spent in the desert where he was led (or “driven” as some translations put it) shortly after his baptism, shortly after his epiphany. In the desert, he was “tempted by Satan.”

We are going into Lent, as if Lent were something to fall into, a vessel. Victor Turner, the celebrated anthropologist, said that on a pilgrimage the whole of geography takes on symbolic meaning. We begin a pilgrimage on Ash Wednesday, a journey in which each step we take matches one in a story. It’s like falling *into* a world, in which each movement reflects a movement elsewhere, each step is matched by another in a parallel dance.

The geography begins in the desert. In the crucible of heat and sand, Jesus was trying to figure out, as Frederick Buechner writes, “what it meant to be Jesus.” In the weeks that follow Ash Wednesday, the Gospel readings will recount what Jesus did afterwards. He walked from town to town, sat down at the table with tax collectors and gluttons, talked to women, healed on the Sabbath, used the wrong fork. It is not at all clear to me that he knew who he was as in: “I’m the Son of God.” Rather, it looks more like he discovered, step-by-step, more about himself as time wore on, as he walked, and waited, and healed.

At the end of Lent, on Palm Sunday, we walk with Jesus into Jerusalem, the city where crowds welcomed him on the Sabbath by spreading palm branches under his feet, and where he was executed by the week's end.

Lent is a journey towards the cross. And towards a tomb, and the mysterious, unending joy of those who found that tomb empty. The goal is to bring its geography into the self, to bend beneath it, to allow the soul to find its narrative within it, its unfolding story. On Ash Wednesday, I enter the desert. I become the woman at the well who demands, "Give me some of that water." I am the blind man begging for sight, the sisters of the dying brother, the halt and the lame calling out from the alleys and hedgerows, "Jesus, remember me," as the sweet Taize song goes, "when you come into your kingdom."

Finally, on the eve of Easter, we will light the tall, white Paschal candle in a darkened church. A deacon sings, "The light of Christ." Lent is a journey, as a biblical scholar put it, from ashes to fire.

This journey, from tonight's ashes, to Easter's fire, I've come to see is a chance to rewrite our own stories. The essence of healing, perhaps the essence of what we mean by resurrection, is to take the chaotic and traumatic events of our lives and rewrite them into a new story, a new life. When I ponder the resurrected Jesus, what I think about now is how out of the chaos and trauma of death, new life was written and revealed.

Before a new story can be rewritten, the old one needs to be examined. Where is your treasure? Where is your heart? It's 10 pm, do you know what your 401K is doing? Where are you putting your time and attention?

Before we can put our hearts and our treasure in right relation, as the Buddhists say, we have to know where our hearts and our treasure are now. Truth chases us during Lent.

I remember once when I signed up to help take care of a friend of mine who was dying, I had imagined standing in a hospital corridor making compassionate decisions gracefully. Instead, what came to pass was that I sat in Ben's living room, jet-lagged, shoveling Chinese take-out food into my mouth, my own house strewn with dirty laundry and a full cat-litter box. I had not imagined that I wanted Ben to hurry up and die. In short, I was the same old screwed up woman.

But in that time, I learned that everything is God's: my screwed up self, my dirty laundry, my harrowing inability to be perfect for Ben. Everything is God's: shame, suicide, depression, egotism, anger, pain, betrayal. Because God is inside everything, findable in everything. God is not too good to hang out with jet-lagged women with cat litter boxes in their dining rooms or men dying of AIDS or someone nailed in humiliation to a cross. God is not too good for anything or anyone.

That is why, in Lent, we can bring anything to God. To see what the story is now. To find out where our hearts are.

And that will mean some pain, yes? It is not easy to face our own darkness, our own ashes. We are all going to come up short, believe me. As a friend said once, when she wanted to take a day off from work: I'm just going to call in ugly. We're all going to have to call in ugly during Lent, that's why we're doing this together.

I asked a friend of mine who is a therapist once how to stop projecting onto others my own fears and weakness, that is - how to love - she said: "You must enlarge your capacity to suffer." That is, we all have to

face up to our own fears and weakness so as not to keep on pretending that it's all someone else's fault.

In Lent, we have to look at the ashes because we are pining for a new story. We are asked to make room for and enlarge our capacity to suffer. And, of course with it, our capacity for joy. That's the fire. Amen.