

Ash Wednesday 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening. It's Ash Wednesday and Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent. And Lent is often, as we start with Ash Wednesday, a time of naming our brokenness, a time of remembering in some ways what's wrong with us, the sins, the mistakes, the parts of us that are not what we want. But I've always thought of this season as also a time of healing, a time of recovery.

And sometimes what we need with that is to name that which is broken. So, you know, you might drop something and break it. And someone might come running and say, well, what happened? I heard it.

Well, the mug fell off the counter and broke. But it's not really like that. It's really like there's a part of my heart that's broken. There's a part of my body that's broken.

And sometimes when I think about the stories of Jesus healing, I hope for my own healing. And I know sometimes what that means is bringing it to Jesus in prayer, bringing it with hope and a sense of believing that that which is broken can be healed in some way, not always the way that we might choose.

Matthew 11 verses 28 to 30 says, Come to me, all who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

[1 : 5 5] Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

It's hard for me sometimes to think of Jesus' yoke as being light and his burden being light. And yet, we're called as disciples of Jesus to take on the yoke of responsibility, to be disciples of Jesus and be a part of the body of Christ. And those who need healing and offer healing to the world are often the very same disciples of Christ.

Christ. So the promise of Jesus is that he is with us through our weariness, through our burdens, through everything. During this Lenten season, we are going to be putting a prayer of confession at the beginning of our worship service, kind of like, here I am, God. I'm coming to worship.

Let me lay down some of what I'm thinking about my own brokenness and ask for your forgiveness so that I might truly worship. And so I'd like to invite you into a prayer of confession.

Merciful God, we have lived a year of Lent. And in the midst of it all, we have seen love shine through at times. But as we look back in this moment, it feels like a year of broken dreams, broken peace. And we might not have always been discouraged, but we have been discouraged.

[4 : 1 0] Even though so much feels out of our control, we also, in the brokenness, in the pandemic, in the isolation, sometimes we see the ways that our own faults and failures, to love each other fully, to care for the least, to honor your creation and to stand up for what's right and good, have not helped. And so we come to you in pieces, fragments, broken shells of our past selves.

And as we imagine ourselves walking along the shores of life, where there is uncertainty and sometimes pain, we ask that you meet us there. Help us, healing God. Show us our own strength. Forgive our inertia, our inability to move. And we pray that in this silence, that we sense and acknowledge our yearning for wholeness.

Hear these words of assurance. Throughout the season of Lent, we are going to be contemplating the symbol of broken glass, sea glass. And you'll see it in the church.

And you'll see it in the church. An unknown author has said this about glass fragments that are collected from the beaches. You know, sea glass comes from broken bottles and pieces of glass that have been thrown or discarded into the ocean.

Here's what this says. Ordinary pieces of tableware or beer or soda bottles are flung into the ocean. Years pass or even decades. And then one day, there it is upon the shore, a small shard from one of those long ago discarded objects.

[6 : 28] Shifting currents have rounded its edges. Abrasion in the sand has polished its surface. Exposure to the sun has altered its color.

And so, when we happen upon it here amidst the shells and seaweed, we can't help but laugh with joy at what seems to be a miracle.

This ordinary fragment of glass that time and adversity have transformed into something beautiful.

It's one of the things I love about sea glass, about stones that are in rivers that roll and hit each other and how they round and polish each other.

And what we know is that it's not by a gentle sea. It's not by a gentle river. It's sometimes vicious and big and violent and scary.

[7 : 31] It's sometimes vicious and beautiful. Time and adversity. Time and adversity. Trouble. Making something beautiful out of something that was once seen as ordinary and thrown away.

Maybe it was already broken. Now considered a precious piece that sometimes is made into jewelry. It's not a precious piece that we have to be a miracle. This is the journey that we undertake with Jesus.

Because Jesus attended to those who are considered just ordinary people, broken people, just like you and I broken people. Even those who seemed unworthy and no matter what.

Jesus is the lover of our souls. So in the name of Jesus Christ, you and I, we are forgiven.

Thanks be to God. My great grandfather bought a piece of property off the Chesapeake Bay.

[8 : 42] I don't know, maybe 150 years ago. I don't know. And there was a time back then when trash was taken in the boat.

It could be the rowboat. It could have been the motorboat. And it was taken out into the water and dumped into the water.

Now this wasn't paper and boxes. This was bottles, beer bottles, medicine bottles, jars, all kinds of things.

And right now when we think of that, we think, oh my gosh, that's horrible. And it was. The broken glass that we had to be careful of when we walked around in the water there because we hadn't any idea that there were broken things there.

Some of those very things drifted out into the current, out into the Chesapeake Bay, out into the ocean and invariably rolled up on a beach somewhere, at least pieces of them.

[10 : 02] And someone came along and picked them up and found a beautiful, beautiful stone. Maybe brown from a beer bottle or a soda bottle.

Maybe green, maybe blue. Maybe blue. And very expensive jewelry is made out of some of those very same things.

Maybe you get the idea of where I'm going. And that is that around us, there are people whose lives look and feel as though they've been thrown away.

Like nobody cares. Nobody cares that they might be about to lose their place of living. Nobody seems to care that they might not have a job or they haven't had a job for a long time.

And often they are tossed around by the winds of pandemic and change and downsizing.

[11 : 17] So in this season of Lent, those very obvious types of brokenness is, and some of our not so obvious brokenness.

The places where our heart is broken, but nobody can see it. The places where we struggle with autoimmune diseases or arthritis, and no one can see it, but we know the pain that it causes.

We each bring brokenness. As we think about these healing stories of Jesus, I believe that we are called upon to look at them and think, not only as a disciple of Jesus, how might I be a part of someone else's healing?

But how might I be healed? By remembering the stories of Jesus healing.

And that might seem odd for Lent. People talk about Lent like giving up candy or coffee.

[12 : 34] Lord have mercy. People think about giving up soda or going to Starbucks or eating out. People give up meat.

The question is why. Historically, the season of Lent was not a season of, I'm going to give something up and that's going to make me a better person, or I'm going to give something up and I'm going to give the money to the poor or something like that.

Lent was historically a time of preparing to become a member of the church, to be baptized in the Christian faith, to learn about God, to learn about what Jesus did, to learn about what Jesus did.

To learn about parts of the Bible. And so this isn't so different. This is a journey towards wholeness that we know comes, we pray, in Easter and Resurrection Sunday.

This is a journey when we're called upon to look inside and outside and around us.

[13 : 51] To look at one another and to look at those we don't know. But also to look at what needs in our own bodies, minds, hearts, spirits, homes, families, might need the healing, tender touch of Jesus.

I have sitting in my lap this piece of wood. I was in Colorado, it was in the first couple of days that I was out in Colorado and something happened with a family that I loved very much.

Our relationship was hurt in that conversation. And so I went for a walk by myself and I went up into the mountain and I found this stick.

It's very complicated. It's twisted. It's got small branches. It's got this little hook. It's got this little hook. And I've, my thought at the time was that I was going to send it to them.

And I was going to send it to them and say, we are all so complicated. We're all different and we're all broken in different ways.

[15 : 29] Here, broken in a big way. Here, broken in a smaller way. Here, holding on to bark and not letting go.

We are all scarred by things that come into our lives. But being in each other's lives and looking for healing is what's most important.

I imagined writing something on this. But as the journey went on, I found that it was myself that needed to hang on to this particular stick.

I needed to hold on to this piece of God's creation that was broken and a little bit tangled because there were parts of me that were feeling that same way.

And so I have kept it and even brought it here. Kind of like a piece of wood, driftwood that you might find on the beach.

[16 : 40] It's not beautiful. It's not smooth and shiny. It's not a piece of sea glass. But what it is, is a reminder that God made this.

God made the tree that this used to be a part of. And that God has a message for me in the brokenness of this stick.

That has to do with my healing. And so until I sort it all out and until I spend time in prayer and in consideration of how it is that God heals, I'm going to hold on to it.

Not physically. I keep it on a shelf over there. My hope and my prayer is that we go through this season and we talk about the way that beach glass is thrown about, the way that brokenness can find healing, the way that our bodies need not just sometimes physical healing, but the healing that comes with the relaxation of being forgiven, understood, and seen.

And there's so much more. When I do ashes, some people do that from dust you came to dust you return.

[18 : 14] When I make the cross on someone's forehead or on their hand, I say, by the sign of this cross, know that you are claimed.

You are claimed. You are claimed by the cross of Jesus Christ. Don't ever forget it. Let's pray. Lord, healing God, be present with us this night.

Lord, healing God, be present in our holiness, in our helplessness, in our hopelessness, in our time of feeling empty or full or broken or healed.

Lord, wherever we each are, be present with us. And I pray that we will go on this journey, that we are claimed in the road towards Jerusalem, together, remembering that we are claimed in the cross, in the sign of the cross, in the remembering of the cross.

We are yours, Lord. We are yours. Amen. With that sign and that symbol, know that you belong to Jesus Christ.

[19 : 50] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Those ■■■■■ Shake. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Ash Wednesday. It's a day set apart for us to remember who we are and whose we are.

[21 : 14] It marks the beginning of the season of Lent. It's a time when Christians from all around the world go on a spiritual journey together, heading toward the cross of Good Friday and toward the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday.

And traditionally, on Ash Wednesday, we receive ashes. That's why it's called Ash Wednesday. And the way that it's done is that we would receive ashes typically on the forehead, but sometimes on the back of the hand.

And it's done with a mark of a cross. So why ashes? Well, the entire experience is something, it's not a sacrament, but it's used in a way to remind us of some very important things for our Christian life.

And the first thing is ashes are a symbol of our own mortality. So the idea is to remind us that God created us from the dust of the earth and that someday we will return to the dust of the earth, that we are mortal.

And I think, you know, especially in what's it been a year now for this global pandemic pretty close. I think many of us have become acutely aware, much more aware of our own mortality, our own fragility, of our own finite being.

[22 : 40] The idea of the ashes is to bring us into awareness of that. And many times things around us will also remind us of that. So we are to remember through the ashes that we are mortal.

And from dust we are created, dust we're going to return. And with that understanding then comes humility. God Almighty is our creator and that we are human and God made us.

And so when we're putting the cross with the ashes on the forehead or on the hand, one of the things that is often said is, remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

The thing is, it's important to remember though, that it's sign of the cross when that's done. And when it's the sign of the cross, it leads us to recognize that there's much, much more.

Because we are more than mortal bodies. Through Christ, we have so much more. There is an eternity available for us. So maybe every time we're faced with anything in our life at all that reminds us of our own mortality or the mortality of the people around us, we can remind ourselves, with Jesus, there is eternity.

[24 : 06] So ashes are used for that. But then they're also used as a sign of mourning, a sign of acknowledging that things are not the way they're supposed to be. It's a sign that's supposed to recognize the brokenness, the pain, the darkness within.

It's a mourning over the sin in our life, the sin that we have with others, the sin in the world. It's a symbol of an outward expression of our heart and our mind.

And oftentimes, if you read through the Bible, when people would be in a state of pain and darkness, in mourning over sin or any of the other things that are broken in the world, they would put on ashes, sackcloth and ashes, an outward expression of that pain and darkness.

And there's a reason why the church decided to use ashes. It's not only for our mortality, but for us too, to recognize this. So we need to always, not only on Ash Wednesday, but always acknowledge humbly our own mortality and our own need for God.

And at the same time with that, we acknowledge our own sin, our own brokenness, our own pain, our own darkness. We look intently into our life and see what needs to change.

[25 : 31] And when we see and we acknowledge and we know we need God, that's where the healing begins. The song that Susan's been playing through the service is a song by 10th Avenue North and it's called This Is Where the Healing Begins.

And some of the lyrics from that are this is where the healing begins. This is where the healing starts. When you come to where you're broken within.

So Lent is a time for self-examination. It's important for us to examine ourselves through the Holy Spirit, our thoughts, our actions, our relationships, and acknowledge the brokenness before healing can begin.

But God doesn't want us to be stuck there. I mean, so often we can do that. You know, we want to see it and we want to know it, but then we get stuck focusing on the brokenness, stuck focusing on the darkness, focusing on the pain.

You know, we're carrying guilt and shame or carrying a burden that we can't seem to break a sin or whatever it is. We're focusing on the things that are broken in our life, but God invites us to something more.

[26 : 53] Healing. Healing begins when we see the brokenness, when we acknowledge that we need God and we recognize, though, that Jesus does not want us to stay stuck in that brokenness.

That lyric goes on saying, when you come to where you're broken within, when you come to where you're broken within, the light meets the dark.

The light, the light of Christ, the light meets the dark. And so the other thing that's said when we're putting on ashes, another thing that can be said, and I honestly say both, another thing is repent and believe the gospel.

The gospel, which is all about grace. Repent and believe the gospel. So the other lyrics are, sparks will fly as grace collides with the dark inside of us.

Sparks will fly as that grace collides. Grace is going to come in and fill that darkness because the healing is beginning. The light of Jesus Christ is coming into our brokenness, our pain, our darkness and bringing his light, his love, his grace into it.

[28 : 21] And so maybe as we go through our days, just a reminder, you know, not just from the ashes, but in an everyday thing. Every time we see light, every time we turn a light, anytime there's darkness, we turn a light on, we say, Jesus brings light into my darkness.

Jesus brings the light. Jesus always brings the light. And through grace, we have the power then to repent.

So instead of us focusing on all of the bad stuff, all of the sin, all of the pain, all of the darkness, all the brokenness, all the things that are not the way they're supposed to be, instead of us focusing on that, when the light of Jesus comes and that grace centers in, we have the power to repent.

Remember what repent means? It means turn around. Imagine you're focused this way on the darkness. darkness. And instead, Jesus turns us around and we face the light, darkness behind us, light in front of us, heading farther and farther into the light, into the light of Christ, who just shines, shines into our life, illuminates the darkness and cleanses us from within.

And it's through that grace, through the power of God, that we have that power to repent, to turn around, the way to go away from ashes and into the light of Christ.

[29 : 58] So, one of the things is we do that through Jesus Christ, the light of Jesus Christ. And I want to remind you that when Jesus first proclaimed his mission on earth, when he got up and he proclaimed it, he read from Isaiah 61.

And I just want to point this out to you because it just shows us so much about what God is doing, what Jesus does for us. He said from Isaiah 61, he brings good news to the poor, binds up the brokenhearted, freedom for the captives, release from darkness for the prisoners.

Let's see what else. Oh, comfort all who mourn, just like he said in the Beatitudes. And this is in verse 3. Love this verse. It says, to bestow on them a crown of beauty for ashes.

Beauty for ashes. That's where the healing begins. And Jesus, who gives beauty for ashes. So, Lent begins a spiritual journey toward Easter.

But, instead of having Lent be a continuous time of sorrow and mourning, let's do something a little different. I invite you into a spiritual journey where we intentionally seek transformation, beauty for ashes.

[31 : 30] not New Year's resolution part two, we're all going to go on a diet together and exercise. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. Spiritual transformation. Okay?

And the way that works is listening to the Holy Spirit. Tuning our eyes, our ears, our heart, our mind, our soul, our whole being over to God.

So, instead of needing ashes as an outward symbol of ourselves being a Christian, people instead know we are Christian by the fruit of the Spirit within us.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Today, today, we begin our spiritual journey through Lent, mindful of who we are and whose we are.

And this is where the healing begins. Healing of our soul, our heart, our mind, our life, our relationships, and our world through Christ.

[32 : 37] Amen. tune in to us, and water, James, and us.

Awesome. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[35 : 15] Thank you. Thank you.

And there comes a point where we simply either forget or we have just gotten so used to the inconvenience of it, gotten so used to the pain of it that we just learn to live with it.

I'd like us to keep that in mind as we consider this word from the Gospel of John chapter 5 and we're going to read verses 1 through 9.

It's a familiar story and I hope we hear it with fresh ears tonight. Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals.

Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate, a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades.

[37 : 14] Here a great number of disabled people used to lie, the blind, the lame, and the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for 38 years.

When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, Do you want to get well?

Sir, the invalid replied, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I'm trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.

When Jesus, then Jesus said to him, Get up, pick up your mat and walk. At once, the man was cured.

He picked up his mat and he walked. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. As I said, sometimes we get used to something that needs to be healed.

[38 : 26] Something about our bodies that isn't working well. And perhaps it might even be something in our thinking that might not be working well. Something that is unhealthy.

Sometimes we're engaged in a habit or a behavior that we think is making us better or making it easier to cope with challenges in our lives.

But at the end of the day, we know it's not good for us. As we come to this season, I'm reminded of the situation of this man.

His awareness of he needs help. He knows that he's not able to move. And he has a hope.

He has a hope that what will happen is if he can just get into that pool, then he should be able to use his legs again. And completely unexpected to this man, Jesus shows up.

- [39 : 29] Now, the text doesn't give us any sense that he knew who Jesus was. He doesn't give us any sense that he was aware that Jesus had any special power.
- He was by the pool the way he had been by the pool every day. But Jesus being Jesus, sees him, has compassion for him, and recognizes that there's something that he can do.
- And Jesus goes to the man and asks a really important question. Do you want to be made well? Do you want to be made well?
- Friends, as we think about our own situations in life, whatever may be something that we lean on to cope, something in our past that may be causing us pain, something that even in our physical bodies may be keeping us from being at our best, and we're just refusing to acknowledge it or care for it properly.
- Jesus asks us the question, do you want to be made well? Do you want to be made well?
- [41 : 01] You know, it's interesting when Jesus asks that question, the man doesn't actually answer it the way you would think. He comes up with, well, there's no one here to help me.
- I can't get to the pool, and other people beat me to the water when it's stirred up. In other words, he may just be making excuses. He might be resigned to his fate.
- He may be in his own way at peace with where he is. But Jesus' question can't be denied.
- Do you want to be made well? And notice that Jesus heals him. It doesn't take the pool.
- It doesn't take any other special action on the part of the man. Jesus just tells him, take up your mat and walk.
- [42 : 04] It's an interesting challenge for him. Because as we said before, there's really no indication that he knew that Jesus could do this or that he knew who Jesus was. But he has to believe Jesus has healed him.
- He has to believe that things are going to be different now. He has to trust that this word that was spoken over him will have the effect it's supposed to have.
- Friends, as we come to these 40 days of the Lenten season, many of us will think about something that we're going to fast from, something that we're going to give up.
- Others may be coming to this season thinking about what it is we might add to our lives, something we might do that is a new and good habit we might want to begin.
- But the challenge of Jesus' question is on our minds. Do you want to be made well?
- [43 : 09] As we think of all we have endured in 2020, in all the ways it's hurt us physically, emotionally, and mentally, it could be other things that linger in our lives, physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual.
- We have an opportunity on this journey to either lay a burden down or to try to move forward, but to trust that Jesus can and will heal us, to take a step towards living in the fullness that he promises, to trust that we can indeed heal and recover through Jesus our Lord.
- I would ask you to consider, what is it that the Spirit may be leading you to say, I can lay this down. I can, in fact, be healed.
- Do you want to be made well? As we take this journey these next few weeks, I hope you are willing to find your yes in that.
- Healing however you need it, wherever you need it, if you take the step. Say yes to God, and be ready to take up your Madden walk as we have experienced this journey together.
- [44 : 59] Amen and amen. I make this in the world. you Thank you.