

Ash Wednesday 2016

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalms 103:8-14

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

While we slept,
A thick blanket of ash covered the city.
And we had no idea.

We had arrived in the dark,
In this strange, huge new city,
And when we woke up and looked out the window,
We couldn't understand what we were seeing.

What is that soft, grey powdery stuff
Covering every surface?
Is this the dust and pollution you should expect
In this enormous, crowded, ancient modern city?
Does it look like this all the time?

We watched as people began to sweep up the heaps of grey stuff,
And finally went out to ask questions
And buy a newspaper.
Volcano erupts! Proclaimed the headlines.

Mystery solved,
But the wonder remained.

Ash pooled around our ankles
As we walked the streets.
We had to watch our steps
Going down into the subway;
Ash had turned the staircase into a hillside.

That was a long time ago now,
But the wonder still remains.
A whole city blanketed
In ash – dense, grey, ash.

It sticks to your clothes and skin,
It threatens to choke you,
It's fascinating and scary and alien
And yet so familiar.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust –
Remember,
Repent,
Reconcile.

This is the day of dust and ashes.
This is the day of new beginnings.

We think of this day,
Ash Wednesday,
And this season of Lent,
As a time of personal reflection and renewal.
Whether it be giving something up,
Or taking something on,
The self-examination and prayer
To which we commit this day
Are focused, for most of us,
Most of the time,
On those things we have done,
Or left undone,
That separate us from God.

What have I done that creates a barrier
Between me and the accepting welcome
Of the one who is always reaching out to me?

What have I left undone
That makes me unable
To embrace the forgiving friend
Who is waiting for me?

These are my sins –
Whatever it is that keeps me stuck,
Isolated, discouraged and resentful,
Self-pitying and judgmental.

In Lent we struggle against these sins;
We undertake a discipline
Or let something go.
We try, we fail,
We try again, we give up,
We start over.
Year after year after year.

And this is good.
But is it enough?

I wonder, this year,
As Lent begins again,
If it is time to repent
Of our repentance being so personal,
Our self-examination so individual,
Our renewal so private.

I wonder if it is time
To listen again to the words of the prophets,
Who called all the people,
Together, as a body,
To renounce their corporate sin
And return with one heart
To the one who would forgive them –
For give them as a people.

The prophets understood
That as a people we can grow away from God,
Forget God,
And lose sight of the promise.

And we understand this too.
When we enter the church
Through the waters of baptism,
We renounce all those things
Which separate us from love and mercy.

We renounce
The brokenness that makes a rift
in the cosmos itself,
a brokenness
Over which we have no power.

We renounce
The structures of government and society
In which we participate and from which we benefit,
Structures and systems
Over which we imagine we are powerless.

And we renounce
the personal failings and faults
With which we struggle,
Which by grace we sometimes overpower.

Lent has been the time,

For generations,
When we recommit
To that personal renunciation,
Seeking to let go
Some of our own individual sins.

But what are the sins we share in common,
The sins that only exist because as a body
We – usually unwillingly or without intention –
consent to them
And reinforce them
And let them steal our freedom,
Our peace, and our joy?

What is the ash that blankets all of us together,
Covering our cities and countries?
What is the dust
That chokes us all together?

Racism is a sin.

How do we renounce it?
What corporate disciplines,
Choices, actions, decisions
Would turn us away from the sin of racism
And towards the reconciling love of the one
In whom we are all one?

The gross and growing inequity
Of our society is a sin.

How do we renounce it?

What actions must we take together
To undo what we have done?
What corporate disciplines
Would shake us out of our complacency?
What choices would promote abundant life for all?

Our despoliation of the planet
Is a sin.

How do we begin to honor the earth –
Called by one theologian
The body of God –
How do we begin to honor the earth

That gives us life?
How do we move from greed to gratitude?

Racism, economic and social inequity,
The despoiling of the planet,
These and other corporate sins
Make a barrier between humankind
And the welcoming acceptance
Of the one who gives us life
And makes love,
New and renewing,
Always and everywhere.

The individual repentance,
The personal disciplines,
The private devotions,
Are still essential.

They give us the strength
And the stamina
To engage the biggest questions.

We have no power,
Of ourselves,
To shift the burden of the ages.
But we can make a right beginning.

We have the power
To face the darkness,
To confess, together,
Our participation in the structures
That rob us of our freedom,
Our peace, and our joy.
We have the power
to shift our allegiance and our hope
beyond ourselves
and offer our feeble strength
and wavering hearts
to the one who can make us whole.

The barrier between us and God will crumble.
We can be reconciled.

When we return to God
With all our hearts,
God will be merciful

And bless us,
And fulfill the promise
Of human dignity,
Abundance,
And flourishing for the whole earth.
God will bless us with understanding
And will to bring this promise to life.

This is what it means
To seek the renewal of the world.
This is why we are here.

Today is the day we remember –
And begin again.