

Ash Wednesday—Year B
Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 103:8-14
II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

When we gathered for Ash Wednesday last year, it was just a few weeks before we went into lockdown. We knew of this Coronavirus, but we didn't have the sense that it would take over our lives. There was an innocence to the last time we gathered to do this. The words of this Ash Wednesday liturgy are potent, powerful words, but they often seem so abstract. They are abstract no more.

One year later, on this day when we gather to mark ourselves with ashes as a sign of our mortality, we are all too aware of how fragile life is indeed. We have all lived with a virus that could go deadly wrong. On this day when we gather to mark ourselves with ashes as a sign of penitence, this past year has revealed all the cracks in our world, all the places of injustice, all the places of division and oppression, of racism and degradation, of indifference. The Litany of Penitence lifts all these places before us on Ash Wednesday, but truly, this year we have lived them over and over again.

Normally, this liturgy crashes upon us like a breaking wave and throws us down until we are gasping for air, but life itself has been crashing upon us for a good 12 months now.

So in a year when it feels like we have been living Ash Wednesday on a daily basis, what are we to do with this day?

Well, just because we've been living it, doesn't mean we've been giving voice to it. This service gives us a place to go with all our fears of death, gives us a place to bring to the light all that we need to repent of, gives us a way to lay claim to our bruised and battered and broken heart and to let the outward marking of these ashes be a sign of all that we've been carrying.

Today, we give voice to all the things that ail us, as individuals, as a people, as a nation, as a world, and as we lift our cries to God, we hear this answer in return:

God hates nothing God has made and forgives the sins of all who are penitent.

The LORD is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness.

For he himself knows whereof we are made; he remembers that we are but dust.

Today isn't about giving voice to all these hard things to feel wretched about ourselves; today is about acknowledging that we've been feeling wretched about a good many things, and we don't have to hold that inside any longer. Today is about standing firmly in our beloved creatureliness, getting comfortable with our dustiness, trusting that however far we have strayed from the life God intends for us and for this world, God's compassion and mercy and kindness are greater still. Today is about acknowledging the truth of what we have lived through this year—in all its wrenching complexity, in all the ways it has wrestled us to the mat, held us there, and just not let us up, in all the ways our heart has been broken, not just once but over and over and over.

But acknowledging all these things, confessing all that we need to confess, giving all these things voice isn't an end unto itself. These are the tools we use to dig down to depths of our heart, making it just a little bit easier for Jesus to get his hands on it, to hold it and heal it, to remind it of the strength and beauty it holds, to remind it of its courage, to soften it where it has grown hard, to quicken it where it's grown faint,

to remind it that it is the spring from which all of our words and deeds, our values and beliefs and actions flow.

Today is about letting our heart beat again, filling us with compassion for this aching, broken world, filling us with passion to act on behalf of the poor and afflicted and oppressed, filling us with the capacity to do those things that Isaiah is talking about—setting aside the pointing of the finger and the speaking of evil, so that love can once again flow from us, so that we can be those watered gardens, those springs whose waters never fail, so that we can get about the work of rebuilding what has fallen into ruin, raising up the foundations of former generations, repairing the breach and restoring the streets that people may once again live in them, instead of walled off from one another in our fear.

The transformed heart can do all these things. And this Ash Wednesday, we take the first step, marking our deep, deep desire for our heart to be made new.

We may not be able to approach this day with the innocence we did last year, but if we let this day, and the Lenten season that is to follow, do its work, then the cries of resurrection life that will greet us 40 days from now will be just as fresh and new as if we were breathing in that Easter morning for the very first time. It won't be the innocence borne of naiveté—we know too much for that—but it will be the innocence that never fails to take our breath away, the innocence that knows the marks of the cross, but also knows the LOVE and LIFE the tomb can't hold. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
February 17, 2021