

Ash Wednesday
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church
 Lewisburg, West Virginia
 March 1, 2017
 Anna Pinckney Straight

Marked by the Cross, by Elizabeth A. Long-Higgins

Like those who have gone before walking this road of Christian faith this day, we too, wear the mark of the cross.
 This mark is, perhaps, more public,
 this mark is, perhaps, more confessing
 than other crosses that we wear throughout the year.
 It is a mere mark, however gritty,
 a dirty smudge which is even more humbling than other marks, than other crosses that we bear.
 But as you wear your mark of the cross from this place this day
 May you remember all that it represents.
 As you wear the mark of the cross
 May you be mindful of ways in which the cross has already marked your life and may you find daily, through this
 Lenten journey, ways in which God is calling you to share with the world
 the love and forgiveness which you have already come to know in the gritty, humble, dirty, sacred
 mark of God — the Cross.
 As you go to wash this mark of grit and ash from your own body may you be mindful of the one whose
 love washes over us.
 May you center on the one whose body lived, died, and rose again.
 May you focus on the one who offers to remove all stains.
 May you breathe a breath of remembrance of the one who gives us life
 and may you, having confessed again what separates you from God's love, say a word of forgiveness even to yourself.
 Perhaps you may ask a loved one to wash the mark for you.
 May you receive the word of forgiveness they offer you — a sign of God's reconciling love at work in this world,
 a sign of how we need each other to give witness to grace itself, and move us ever closer to God's heart.

Joel 2:1-2, 12 – 17

1 Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near— 2 a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.

12 Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; 13 rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. 14 Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD, your God? 15 Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; 16 gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. 17 Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep. Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, "Where is their God?""

It is, now, the season of Lent.

A time of repentance.

Days of contemplation.

A season of breaking open our hearts.

Prying open our lives.

Being honest, so that, and the end of it,

the result of our journey might be Good News. Hope. Promise.

We're not there, yet.

Tonight is the beginning.

The beginning of a journey that takes us, intentionally, on a walk through the wilderness.
Wilderness in which we are asked to face up to that which we would rather deny.
Choose to go to the places we normally avoid.
To examine where we are,
and in that examination discover something about where God is calling us to go.

For some of us that honesty comes easily.

The pain is already on the surface, the waves of grief still coming close together.

For others of us, it is not so easy.

We tend to be quite good at covering things up.
And making ourselves look like we're fine.
Maybe even saying the words.

God is calling all of us to this time of examination.

Tonight, in this place, we gather around the same truth.

We are all broken.
We are all in need of mending.
The journey of Lent is about bringing us closer to the One who heals.

Tonight, we take on ashes.

A sign of our own mortality.
A signal of our repentance.
The mark of the journey that is ahead.

We will hear the words and we will wear the sign.

We are going on a Lenten journey.

In the forty days ahead,

we deviate from our normal path in order to gain some perspective.
Maybe you honor Jesus's fasting by fasting from something yourself.

If your life is already being lived in the wilderness, Lent might be a time of grace in which you call for a soothing balm.

As Madeline L'Engle wrote one year¹:

It is my Lent to break my Lent,
To eat when I would fast,
To know when slender strength is spent,
Take shelter from the blast

Maybe the forty days ahead will be ones of a new spiritual discipline.

In the church we bury our alleluias.

Give them up.
Pack them away.
Knowing that this fast, this time away,
will make them all the more sweet to our lips and our ears on Easter morning.

A few years ago a reporter called

¹ Madeline L'Engle, *The ordering of love: the new and collected poems of Madeleine L'Engle* (Google eBook)

Random House Digital, Inc., Mar 15, 2005, 384 pages

<http://books.google.com/books?id=A8VCSfVYPXUC&lpg=PT287&dq=lent%201966%20madeleine%20L'Engle&pg=PT288#v=onepage&q&f=false> Retrieved February 22, 2012.

to ask about Ash Wednesday and Lent,
about the rules for this season in the church life.

I told her that there weren't any rules, because there are not expectations,
only the invitation to walk with Jesus in a particular way
and find deeper communion with God.

It is a very particular way in which we live into the spirituality of subtraction²,
recognizing that we don't find God by adding things to our life,
we find God through subtraction.

By taking away.

By making room.

By having a yard sale instead of tightening our grasp.

In a musical instrument it is not the solid places that make the notes,
it is the empty places where the sound waves are able to resonate.
And so it is with us.
While we are full of ourselves, we cannot sing to the glory of God.

Shane Claiborne, in the online website Huffpost, writes³

"In a world filled with clutter, noise and hustle,
Lent is a good excuse to step back and rethink how we think and live.
In a world of instant gratification, it's a chance to practice delayed gratification
– to fast –
so that we can truly appreciate the blessings we have...."

And, I would add, the blessings to come.

We aren't the first to this tradition.

It is an ancient one.

Recognizing that you can't arrive in a new future without making a change in your present.
The process of examen, examination has been practiced by monks and mystics in all times,
including this one.

Throughout the Bible we hear of garments being rended,
fasts being proclaimed,
ashes being taken on.
As a way to apologize to God.
As a way to have their outer selves look more like the true brokenness that is within.

These are the words we heard from the prophet Joel⁴,
under God's judgment,
living with plague and drought,
the people, God's people, are called to return.
To return to the ways God had given them.
To return to Godself.
And to get there by way of repentance, by way of the wilderness.

And so are we.

² This is an idea written about by Meister Eckhart, Richard Rohr, and others...

³ Shane Claiborne, "Fat Tuesday and Skinny Wednesday" for HuffPost Religion, posted February 21, 2012.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shane-claiborne/fat-tuesday-and-skinny-wednesday_b_1291931.html
Retrieved February 22, 2012.

It was in this blogpost that I found the idea of the hollow places and the music, as well as Lent being an invitation.

⁴ Elizabeth Achtemeier. "Joel." *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. VII). Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996. 315-319.

Invited to return.
 Invited to repent.
 Invited to be honest with ourselves and one another.
 Not as an act of self-flagellation, but an act of hope.
 A step of faith.
 Knowing that God who created us will not forsake us,
 and God is the very one who is calling to us from beyond the wilderness to come home.

There is not one of us who is exempt.
 Not the young or the old,
 the wise or the simple.
 The mature in the faith or the one who has just come to belief.
 The joyous and the grieving.
 The one who is lost and the one who thinks they have a map.
 We all have a Lenten journey to travel.
 We all have a wilderness place calling our name.

Jan Richardson writes, in her poem entitled, "Rend Your Heart:"⁵

To receive this blessing,
 all you have to do
 is let your heart break.
 Let it crack open.
 Let it fall apart
 so that you can see
 its secret chambers,
 the hidden spaces
 where you have hesitated
 to go.
 Your entire life
 is here, inscribed whole
 upon your heart's walls:
 every path taken
 or left behind,
 every face you turned toward
 or turned away,
 every word spoken in love
 or in rage,
 every line of your life
 you would prefer to leave
 in shadow,
 every story that shimmers
 with treasures known
 and those you have yet
 to find.
 It could take you days
 to wander these rooms.
 Forty, at least.
 And so let this be
 a season for wandering
 for trusting the breaking

⁵ Jan Richardson, blogpost, "Day 1, Ash Wednesday: Rend Your Heart," in *The Painted Prayerbook, word & image & faith*.
 Posted February 15, 2012.
<http://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/02/15/day-1ash-wednesday-rend-your-heart/>
 Retrieved February 22, 2012.

for tracing the tear
 that will return you
 to the One who waits
 who watches
 who works within
 the rending
 to make your heart
 whole.

Sisters and brothers, the season of Lent is not an obligation,
 it is an invitation.

To rend our hearts.

To walk with Jesus and examine that where we are and
 where God calls us to go.

Offer nothing short of our very selves to God this Lent
 and reflect on the One whose love changes everything.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

**We are invited, therefore, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Lent,
 beginning with the imposition of ashes.**

Litany for Lent, followed by Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer

O Christ, out of your fullness we have all received grace upon grace.
 You are our eternal hope;
 you are patient and full of mercy;
 you are generous to all who call upon you.
Save us, Lord.

O Christ, fountain of life and holiness, you have taken away our sins.
 On the cross you were wounded for our transgressions
 and were bruised for our iniquities.
Save us, Lord.

O Christ, obedient unto death, source of all comfort,
 our life and our resurrection,
 our peace and reconciliation:
Save us, Lord.

O Christ, Savior of all who trust you,
 hope of all who die for you,
 and joy of all the saints:
Save us, Lord.

Jesus, Lamb of God,
have mercy on us.

Jesus, bearer of our sins,
have mercy on us.

Jesus, redeemer of the world,

grant us peace.....

God of All⁶- Wilderness and mountain, valley and meadow
 Truly dust we are, and to dust we shall return.
 Truly yours we are, and to you we shall return.
 May this season be a time of turning round and beginning again.

Through the forty days of Lent,
 help us to follow you and to find you: in the discipline of praying
 and in the drudgery of caring –
 in whatever we deny ourselves,
 and whatever we set ourselves to learn or do.

Help us to discover you
 in our loneliness and in community,
 in our emptiness and our fulfilment,
 in our sadness and our laughter.
 Help us to find you when we ourselves are lost.
 Help us to follow you on the journey to Jerusalem
 to the waving palms of the people's hope,
 to their rejection, to the cross and empty tomb.

Help us to perceive new growth amid the ashes of the old.
 Help us, carrying your cross, to be signs of your Kingdom.

We offer this in Your name, and in your words...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Benediction:

Friends, We have been marked.
 Marked with our mortality.
 Marked with our need for repentance.
 And Marked as God's own.

As so, as we leave this place to journey into the wilderness, we know,
 we do not go alone. God goes with us.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁶Jan Sutch Pickard from Eggs & Ashes, published by Wild Goose Publications, Iona Community, Fourth Floor, Savoy House, 140 Sauchiehall St, Glasgow G2 3DH, UK.