

From Ashes to New Life
Ash Wednesday – March 2, 2022
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You might think I'm crazy, but Lent is my favorite season of the church year. This is partly because, as the black sheep in a somewhat troubled family growing up, I've always been keenly aware of my need for repentance and forgiveness. As an adult, though, I can honestly say I'm very grateful for this self-knowledge. And for the Lenten season, to dive in and do a little more interior house cleaning.

I also love the physicality of Lent, beginning with the feel of the ashes being traced in the sign of the cross on my forehead on Ash Wednesday. While most pastors don't do it anymore, I always liked burning the palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday and grinding the ashes into powder, making Ash Wednesday an even more earthy experience. Earthy – like the dust, the humus, the dirt we come from and return to.

The Ash Wednesday readings that lead us into Lent are also pretty earthy. Isaiah makes it clear that God's not much interested in piously bowed heads or sanctimonious sackcloth and ashes to show our repentance. Instead God wants to see real-world changes in our behavior. Tangible peace-making, as in no more pounding fists, pointing fingers or accusing words. Enfleshed justice-making, like providing food, shelter and clothing for people in need. Only then will God make our bones strong; make us like a watered garden and a spring whose waters never fail. All very real-world, embodied realities.

Matthew's talk about what have become the traditional Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving is also down-to-earth. He tells us not to brag or show off when we give to those in need. In fact, we're to give in secret, even avoiding our own egotistical self-appraisal by not allowing our right hand to know what our left hand is doing. That's pretty darn secret! We're to pray, in ways not to be seen by others, but behind closed doors where only God can see. And we're to look and act normal when we fast, rather than mope around so others will notice.

Even Matthew's description of what happens to ego-centered religiosity is earthy – it will be consumed by rust and moths, stolen by thieves. And then where will our restless hearts find a home? That treasured safe haven, Matthew reminds us, rests only in God.

When Paul entreats the Corinthians to be reconciled to God, he's not just asking them to profess their faith in God, but to live their faith in very concrete ways. He's asking them to do the sorts of things we heard about in Luke's sermon on the plain in recent weeks – to forgive and even love our enemies, to do good to people who hurt us. Real world, hard stuff.

Paul's asking his hearers, and us, to join with Jesus in setting aside concern for ourselves in a very Lenten way, a way that leads to the cross. Paul urges us to imitate Jesus in dying to

ourselves – to our comfort, our egos, and, yes, even to our self-preservation -- so that we can take on the sin of the world in a way that leads us into God's transformative grace rather than one more dead end.

Paul's list of the many awful hardships the apostles endured in spreading the gospel, juxtaposed with their unwavering response of patience and kindness, reminds us that in Christ goodness is always ready to emerge. Right in the middle of the world's worst brokenness and of our deepest pain.

Lent means spring – like the coming season – and our Lenten disciplines of self-denial are meant to lead us beyond our seasons of hardship into a springtime of transforming love and new life.

Paul assures us that the grace of salvation is always right here, right now! Ready to spring forth right in the middle of everything that ails us. Right in the midst of all our real-world suffering, whether personal or collective. Right now, as our nation seems hopelessly divided and swallowed up by anger. Now is the acceptable time, even when people all around the world are starving. And yes, now, as bombs are dropping in Ukraine.

How this can be true, I don't know. I can't really even tell you how I know it's true. But I do believe that as we embark on this Lenten journey together with our sisters and brothers in Christ, we are, each in our own small way, planting seeds that God will bring to new life.

I think it's like the butterfly effect in chaos theory, where a small change has big, unpredictable effects in the distant future. Which makes me wish God didn't work in evolutionary time since my ego likes to see results. But still, I trust. And hopefully my trust will lead me to take small but intentional steps toward the changes I want to see in myself and in the world.

Facebook recently re-introduced me to the remarkable work of pianist Daryl Davis. Decades ago, Davis, a Black man, had a chance interaction with a white bar patron that would change both their lives. The patron, who'd never really talked to a Black man before, and was sure Jerry Lee Lewis was the inventor of the blues he enjoyed hearing Davis play, turned out to be a member of the Ku Klux Klan. But Davis was still drawn to share his knowledge of music and even to discuss race with him.

To make a very long story short, Davis not only befriended this man, he went on to devote decades of his life getting to know and be known by Klan members in hopes of eradicating the hate he believes grows from ignorance. In addition to that first guy in the bar, more than 200 Klansmen Davis befriended have quit the Klan and repudiated its racist views, including some important leaders of the group. Davis has written several books about his experiences, and despite sharp criticism from some Black activists who see him as a dangerous sellout, continues his quiet work and now also trains people in the art of civil discourse.

Who knows where all the long-range, unattributed effects of Davis's kindness and courage will lead? But researchers do know that people are more likely to change their views in response to good relationships with people holding different beliefs than they are just from learning the facts behind those beliefs.

And even when perspectives don't change due to friendly relations, the tenor of the discourse often does. Here, I'm reminded of the efforts of One Iowa leader Donna Red Wing to befriend Bob Vander Plaats of the Family Leader and other conservatives who opposed LGBTQ rights. Even though she wasn't able to change their outlook all that often, she was frequently successful in getting them to change their rhetoric and tactics. They tempered their approach because they liked and respected her. And that is definitely a step in the right direction.

Though it doesn't come naturally to me, and I know it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks, I yearn to take bigger risks in moving in that same direction. I'm not very particular about what opposing views I might face – racial equity, LGBTQ rights, criminal legal reform, religious fundamentalism, feminism, you name it. What I am passionately interested in, though, is honing my skills and boosting my courage to build on-going, mutually friendly relationships with people whose beliefs I think are wrong, or even dangerous. Certainly, I'd like to help change people's views to what I consider to be truer to Gospel values. But more importantly, I long to let God re-make me so that I can more truly love my enemies, which I think is perhaps the ultimate Gospel value. And as Gandhi is said to have said, we're all called to be the change we wish to see in the world.

And if not now, when? Lent, like springtime, is meant to be a season of change. Though there's not lot of evidence above ground yet, the earth is already re-awakening. Colorful signs of new life will burst forth any time now.

So tonight, as we feel the Lenten ashes smudged cross-wise on our foreheads, may each one of us commit to cultivating our own interior soil over these next forty days. Let us prepare the ground of our being, as persons and as church, that new life in Christ might spring forth at Easter.

Amen, and thanks be to God.