

## **Ash Wednesday**

**March 2, 2022**

**Psalm 51**

**Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

Wednesday was church day. When I was in elementary school and middle school and high school Wednesday was church day. Kid's choir met that night, as did confirmation, youth group, the youth choir and the adult choir. The church building was buzzing in every room with activity. We couldn't muster a whole lot of enthusiasm for confirmation class—teenagers rarely can—but by the time we were in high school, it was very different story. Supper was at 6 at home; my brother and I gulped it down so we could be out the door at 6:15 and on our way to youth group. Couldn't wait to see our friends, sing, and goof around.

I was thinking that very few—maybe none—of us approach this Wednesday with that kind of enthusiasm. I mean, racing to church for Ash Wednesday seems like an oxymoron...And then I realized that maybe I was wrong about that, about our eagerness to get to this worship service. Some of us come today out of habit or duty because it marks the beginning of Lent—but we also come because there is something deeply true about this day, something in it that speaks to our hearts, that shines a light into the dark corners of our lives. And that truth, simply put, is this: we are not okay, not by a long shot.

On every other Wednesday, every other day, we pretend that we are, don't we? The people around us, the culture around us, doesn't much care for weakness, or grief, or guilt, or prolonged thoughts about just how short this life is. If a part of your body is failing, there's a prescription for it. If your mind or your heart is in anguish, buck up and get over it...Did a friendship go badly? Did your marriage fail? Did you hurt somebody? Did you do something wrong? "No worries," we hear loud and clear--move on, you'll be fine.

Only we aren't, are we? And as each day on the calendar goes by, we know it. We know what's it's like to have a heart so wounded that it actually *hurts*

inside our chest. We know what a burden guilt is, carrying the memories of what we've done that we shouldn't, and what we haven't done that we should. And we know there are some days when life seems pointless, like all we do and all we are crumbles in our hands. We hurt others, we hurt ourselves, we turn away from God's love, we waste the days we've been given...and today, today we have the guts to race to church to tell God all about it.

On this Wednesday we are keenly aware of the brokenness of our world, how quickly war, violence and hatred, once begun, ripple outward with destruction, pain, and death. We are called to speak the truth that what is happening in Ukraine is evil; evil perpetrated by one man and encouraged by others. But on this Wednesday, we also recognize the truth that inside each of us there is hatred, prejudice, self-centeredness, and as we'll say in a moment "indifference"—to so much and to so many.

"Have mercy on me, God," we whisper, or cry, or even shout inside our heads. "Have mercy on this broken, messed-up and distracted heart. Make me new again." You come; and yet we also come *together* in this place as a community, journeying through Lent together, journeying through life together. We join millions of others all over the world today: "Have mercy on *us*," we pray.

God's answer comes in a cross traced on our foreheads: *Remember that you are dust*. Our brokenness is on full display, for us and for others to see. And yet, within the ashes, there is a promise:

"Return to me," God says, "with all your heart—for I am gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

Today we come to begin again—to begin a season that reshapes our lives...When Jesus began his ministry, he said "Repent, and believe the good news." The truth that makes us uncomfortable will also set us free, if we let it...We are invited into a deepening of faith, a loosening of our grip on our treasures, and an expansion of Christ's grace in daily life. Jesus came not just to shine a spotlight on the reality of our sinfulness, our brokenness, our

ways of death—Jesus came with power and with love to drive out demons, to heal, to forgive, to bridge the chasm we so carefully curate between ourselves and God.

This mark on our forehead is in the shape of a cross for a reason-- to remind us of the abundant grace that ripples out for the world in Jesus' death and resurrection. Abundant grace--for all that we have done...and all we have failed to do.

God knows we are not okay, not by a long-shot, and yet welcomes us to new life in Christ.

So we come, with the audacity to believe that God wants us to come, wants us to speak the truth, wants us to begin again, today, this Wednesday, this Lent.