



Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58:1-12; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10;
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21; Psalm 103:8-14

“It’s like a war zone up here, like a movie scene.”
“This is a level of horror few of us could have anticipated.”
“It’s like Hiroshima, like a nuclear bomb.”
“It was hell on earth.”

These were just some of the ways survivors described the deadliest wildfires to take place this century. They happened in 2009 in Australia, in the state of Victoria. At least 210 people died. 1800 homes were destroyed, and over 7000 people were displaced. But perhaps the most horrifying revelation about the fires came when authorities announced they believed the fires were caused not by natural disaster, nor by accident, but by arson.

And in this story, the failures of humans to live out God’s intention for us are all written in miniature. We human beings were created in a green and flourishing garden to love and serve God’s entire creation with thanksgiving and joy: to live eucharistically, speaking words of blessing over all that has been given into our care. Instead, whether through carelessness or malice, we tend so easily to turn it instead into ash.

Think of all the ways that what happened in Victoria is a microcosm of all our human fallenness. First of all, its impact on the natural world. The charred grasses and trees of the Australian landscape are a small symbol of all the ways we fail to care for our planet, threatened by pollution, smog, and global warming. Next, the way it devastated homes and families: an image of our wounded economy and our tendency toward shattered relationships and broken families. And finally, those who died in Victoria: two hundred people whose deaths are emblematic of the way we humans are addicted to killing one another and being killed.

Just yesterday in Tacoma a 23-year-old man named Kiyoshi Higashi was found guilty of first-degree murder. Last April, he and three other people apparently saw an ad on Craigslist

advertising a diamond ring for sale and plotted together to rob the home. When Jim Sanders fought back, he was shot dead in front of his family. It's a gruesome story, and more upsetting because it happened close to home. But it's all part of the overarching narrative of how we have been harming and killing one another, out of hatred, greed, or just carelessness, throughout the millennia. The story starts, at least in Scripture, with Cain's murder of his brother Abel; it continues through the centuries, through the Crusades and the Inquisition, to the all-too-literal ashes of mass death the past century has shown us at Hiroshima and Dachau.

As the people of Victoria looked out two years ago at their charred landscape, remembering the grass and trees that once made it green, so we look at the world God has given us and the eucharistic words of praise we were created to say can easily turn to dust and ashes in our mouths.

Yet there is hope.

There is hope for us in this news: God has chosen not to abandon us to our fate, but to come right in with us.

As we heard a moment ago in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians: "For our sake God made Jesus to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Jesus we might become the righteousness of God." In other words, Jesus, who uniquely among all humanity was free of our fallen brokenness, chose freely to empty himself of divine privileges and become subject to our human condition with all its beauty and all its suffering.

Paul says that in the cross and resurrection of Jesus God has reconciled the whole world to God's own self. Not some of the world: not the righteous, not the decent; but ALL. God's free gift of reconciliation is given to both those people in Victoria whose houses were destroyed and the careless or wicked arsonist who set the fire. To both Jim Sanders, murdered in his home, and Kiyoshi, convicted of his murder. There is no entrance exam for the grace of God.

Of course, we can fail to open ourselves to receive it. Paul goes on to warn the Corinthians "not to accept the grace of God in vain." And we have received it in vain when we begin to congratulate ourselves on our goodness. Paradoxically, we Christians can be better at that than anyone else. And so we do well to hear Jesus' warning in today's gospel reading against hypocritical worship, priding ourselves on appearances, assuming we have ourselves put together until we forget our deep need of God. That forgetfulness is what we are here today to resist. In a few moments, when we come forward to receive ashes, we will be told, "REMEMBER that you are dust." We need to remember our own ashiness, so that when we come to the Easter feast we may not receive it in vain.

There is a word for remembering our own limitations and weakness. It's an old word, and one that we don't use as often anymore—partly because it's been used too often to beat people into submission and blind obedience. But it's still a good and faithful word. The word is "humility." And it comes from the same word as "humus"—a word for soil, dirt—indeed, the most fertile layer of the soil. When we have humility; when we remember that we are dust, that we are humus—we can become fertile soil for God to grow in us. Like the soil, we don't produce life out of our own independent efforts; we are simply fruitful recipients of the life God sends. And when we live in this way, we are returning to our eucharistic calling by blessing God for the life we have been given.

The web site of the Museum of the province of Victoria features a page that tells the story of how the local forest regenerates after a bushfire. As it happens, the mountain ash trees that make up the forests of Victoria reproduce only from the seed that drops out of the tree crown following a fire. The seeds fall by the millions, and the new saplings are nourished by minerals from the ashes covering the ground. The ash from the fire releases nutrients back into the soil which had previously been sequestered in the old trees, allowing for new growth.

This Lent, may we remember that we are dust, so that we may receive the grace of God with open rather than closed hearts. And may these ashes fertilize the soil of our souls, so that God may once again make a fresh planting in our lives, that we may be part of God's renewal of the entire creation, the garden we were created to tend with joy and thanksgiving.

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