



The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty
Ash Wednesday – February 18, 2026

The Invitation of Lent

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



[Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21] *Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your*

fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

I have a memory from when I was 7 years old of lying on my bedroom floor and daydreaming about life. Somehow my mind wandered to the frightening questions of existence – What was I before I was born? What happens when I die – will I know myself? I found myself contemplating nothingness and got a sick, sinking feeling in my stomach.

That was the first time I remember becoming aware of my own mortality. More than fifty years later, I am struck by how quickly time accelerates. Even joyful moments carry a bittersweet edge, reminding me how precious life is.

As my godmother said when she entered hospice, "Honey, none of us are getting out of here alive."

Ash Wednesday grounds us in the truth of our mortality as we begin our forty-day journey into the Lent. It is a wilderness season, meant to shake off disillusion and embrace the world,

broken as it is, broken as we are. We do that with self-reflection, on our own and with each other. And we take stock of our spiritual, emotional and material lives.

As grounding for that work today, we hear the words of the prophet Isaiah, whose blunt assessment of Israel's failings in the sixth century BCE still rings true: "You serve your own interests and oppress your workers. You quarrel and fight, even while you are acting pious. Do you not remember what God desires? To loose the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, care for the hungry, homeless, and poor, and not hide yourself from your own kin. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and . . . you shall cry for help, and the Lord will answer, "Here I am.""

Isaiah's words are a summons to repentance, literally "metanoia" – a change of mind -- to acknowledge how far we have strayed from God's desires for us and the world and our

own complicity in the injustice that causes suffering for others.

His words are also a summons to return, to change course and recommit ourselves to God's ways, knowing that this is the only path to freedom, healing, and new life.

We begin Lent with the imposition of ashes and hear, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." We receive them individually, and yet as a community -- not to display our piety, but to affirm that we are not alone in this work of repentance and return.

We know there is no escape from the forces, internal or external, that separate us from God and one another. Selfishness, complicity, shame, and hypocrisy are threats to our life with God and our life together. But when we gather to pray and receive ashes together, we affirm that we share this journey.¹ We walk together, bearing each other's burdens, listening to each other's

fears, and reminding each other of God's mercy and grace.

In the opening prayer, we ask God to "create in us new and contrite hearts, so that we can we worthily lament our sins and acknowledge our wretchedness." Some will hear this word "wretchedness" and head straight to the mire of shame or unworthiness. But that is not what it means.

"Wretch" comes from an Old English word meaning "stranger" -- one in exile. When we "acknowledge our wretchedness," we admit that we can drift so far from God and from our true selves that we feel like strangers, exiled even from our own hearts.

Today, we are invited to an intentional season of examining this distance, of opening ourselves to holy searching of the dark and fearful corners of our lives, so we can fully experience God's mercy and forgiveness and embrace the new life that will dawn on the fortieth day.

¹ *Christian Century* commentary on Ash Wednesday.

We know light and hope will come at Easter, but the journey of Lent comes first.

In a moment, we will pray the Litany of Penitence and have the opportunity to consider the parts of our lives that run counter to Jesus' commandment to love God and neighbor, and that create that sense of exile and of being a stranger to ourselves. It is a sobering practice. When we realize all the ways that we run from God, it can stir that same sinking sensation. We don't know where to turn.

If repentance feels overwhelming, listen carefully. Spiritual director Martin Smith writes: Our "impulse to repent and desire for forgiveness springs from God's prior longing for our reconciliation. God is the one who yearns for our pardon and peace and the completion of our conversion. God is the one who knows how to disarm, heal and enlighten you, how to bring you through the process of repentance.

Your part is to listen, sense how God is doing it, and actively cooperate."²

And that is the invitation of Lent.

Holding our mortality in plain sight helps us realize the profound gift of life and focuses us on the opportunities for healing and freedom right in front of us.

The very fact that we are here suggests that, in some small way, we have felt God's yearning for reconciliation and peace. Our part is to listen and cooperate with the One who loves us completely -- as a friend, not a stranger -- and who longs to bring us out of exile. And as we do, may we find that even in dust, there is promise of new life.

Let us begin a Holy Lent.

² Martin L. Smith, Reconciliation, 2.