

## Gospel - Mark 6: 1-6

### Ash Wednesday

Sermon 2.17.21

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“Remember you are dust,” the liturgy says. The theme of Ash Wednesday of course is death. It’s not rocket science to comprehend that the grey-black color of dirt and ash is the grey-black color of a corpse.

Today we begin our 40-day journey toward the Cross and death (and toward resurrection, I should add) with an intentional day of fasting and repentance.

Marking our foreheads with dust or ash, we acknowledge that we die and return to the earth. We admit our own mortality; as well we take into account that our time on earth is short.

At the same time, the dust traces the life-giving cross indelibly marked on our foreheads at baptism. While we journey through Lent to return to God, we have already been reconciled to God through Christ. We humbly pray for God to make our hearts clean, while we rejoice that “now is the day of salvation.”

Returning to our baptismal call, we more intentionally bear the fruits of mercy and justice in the world.

That is the simple summary.

Specific to today’s Gospel, Jesus warns against our practicing a piety that is inwardly motivated by outward comparison and show.

The Old Testament Prophet urges us to practice “God’s chosen fast,” which, it turns out, has nothing to do with abstaining from food and drink. Isaiah rather calls us to fast from our own self-interest to open the eyes of our hearts to the needs of our suffering neighbors.

Although we accompany our Savior on a road that leads to death, there is still much work for us to do. The demonized need to be made free. The sick and the suffering need to be healed. The hungry need to be fed, racial barriers need to be broken into pieces, and the poor and the homeless need to be clothed and housed.

I cannot say it better than Isaiah himself has said,

<sup>6</sup> *Is not this the fast that I choose:*

*to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,*

*to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?*

<sup>7</sup> *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;*

*when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

This is our great mission on the way to the Cross; and this is our call, our piety, our alms, our prayer, our fast, our earthly treasure.

On this we must now set our hearts, Jesus says.

But what if our self-interests turn out to be largely negative and self-deprecating? What if we can't see the needs of our neighbors since we are too busy with coddling our own sense of inadequacy and limitation? What if our inner inadequacy script keeps getting in the way of God's vision of who we are and what we are to accomplish in his name? Wouldn't that sense of unworthiness and unlovedness on our part be a worthy thing to give up, to totally abandon for the Season of Lent?

To repeat again the words of the Prophet slightly altered:

<sup>6</sup> *Is not this the fast that I choose:*

*to loose the bonds of injustice with which you bind yourselves,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke with which you shackle yourselves,  
and to let you, the oppressed, go free,  
and to break every yoke?*

Do you not remember with me those terrifying moments in Do you not remember with me those terrifying moments in childhood?—when for example you stood paralyzed with your toes over the edge of the diving board, your hands folded together and pointing downward, and then crying out to your parents or your swim coach, “I can't! It's too deep! It's too far down! It's too scary!”

This Lenten Season we all need to go on a long, extended fast from the words that tell us, I'm not good enough or capable enough or worthy enough or accomplished enough or quite simply, I am not enough. They are the words that tell us if we make the dive we will suffer and drown and die.

“Remember you are dust.” You ARE going to die.

When Jesus and his three disciples came down from the Mount of Transfiguration his entire ministry changed. From that moment on, for the next nine months or so till Calvary, Jesus plainly, explicitly and directly taught his disciples that:

“‘The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.’ But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him” (Mark 9:31-32).

They did not remain in the dark for very long, however, and Jesus kept on hammering the message home, all the way through to the end.

“Remember you are dust.” You are going to die. Ah, but what life with you lead, what life will you create, what life with you bring with you as you walk on a pathway toward death?

Over the several days of preparing this message I have been thinking about George Bailey and his guardian angel, Clarence. I know *It's A Wonderful Life* is all about the Christmas season, but what if we carry its message over into this Ash Wednesday?

You remember George Bailey. In the words of the original story-writer's own daughter, Marguerite Stern Robinson:

“George Bailey . . . runs the Bailey Brothers Building & Loan Association, a firm providing commercial financial services to many in and around the (fictional) town of Bedford Falls. Many of the Building & Loan’s clients are among the town’s low-income population, who made good use of their mortgage loans and other financial products and over time were able to build a small house, increase their income, and improve their lives. But Henry Potter . . . , majority shareholder in Bailey Building & Loan, and George’s nemesis, aims to stop the Building & Loan from providing home loans and other financial services to the working poor. Wealthy, powerful, corrupt, and ruthless, Potter plans to gain control of the firm (his interest in real estate is in renting rundown slum shacks to poor people at high rents). Having already taken control of the bank, the bus line, and the department stores in Bedford Falls, Potter now prepares to take over the Bailey Brothers Building & Loan Association.”

As the plot unfolds Bailey can do nothing to avert a “run on the bank.” And when his personal failure in the matter becomes too much for him to bear, George seeks for suicide relief in the icy waters of the Bedford Falls River.

George Bailey's life in Bedford Falls did not turn out as he had hoped. His dreams were big. His means were small.

He was frustrated with a little village filled with little lives and all ceaseless little problems. He wanted to expand his existence, travel the world and have grand adventures. He complained and cursed the poverty and circumstances that held him back. All the while George contributed immeasurably to the life and health and hope and wellbeing of the good people of Bedford Falls in ways he could not know or see.

He saw only his lack. He needed a revelation to see their gain.

Enter one apprentice guardian angel named Clarence who is seeking to earn his wings.

“I wish I had never been born!” Bailey cries out in the depths of despair, and Clarence grants him his wish.

What follows next is an entirely new vista of revelation—what the world would be like without George Bailey in it—trodden, beat down, depressed and despairing as Bailey himself, without either hope or recovery from the miserly, oppressive thumb of Henry Potter.

Bright and hopeful Bedford Falls transforms to become the twisted and dark town of Pottersville.

What would life in Shelton even look like if you were not in it? You do not know; you cannot know the end of your story, no matter how long or few your days remaining.

“Remember you are dust.” Remember, too, you are baptized. And with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities that are conferred—that are “appertaining thereunto.”

Today, Ash Wednesday, is about letting the truth come all the way to the surface: Yes, there is dirt. You were made from dirt and to dirt you will return.

Social media won’t show it to you, you likely won’t find it displayed in holiday greetings, and as a result you might be led to believe that you’re the only one who has any dirt mucking up your life.

But this is a lie.

There is dirt in our entire world, soot beneath the surface of every neat and tidy human story, dust collecting in the lives of perfect-seeming families, ash polluting the precious air we breathe.

There is dirt in our entire world, soot beneath the surface of every neat and tidy human story, dust collecting in the lives of perfect-seeming families, ash polluting the precious air we breathe.

Perhaps you yourself have hidden your dirt in success, work, or volunteering, and also in hidden failures.

Perhaps your energy has gone into propping up a meticulous self-image so that others might not know about and might not judge you for your failings, your sin, your humanity.

On Ash Wednesday, we call that way of hiding what it is: a false life lived in the service of an often too negative self-image. On Ash Wednesday, that way of living, that inadequacy script, gets buried underneath God's own mark so that we can actually live.

Today the truth comes out: There is dirt, and it is everywhere! But what's more, our God desires our dirt. Our earthy grime does not disqualify us in God's eyes. In fact, in the eyes of a God who first made us out of dirt, it qualifies us to be recreated!

So today we collectively give up fasting or giving offerings or praying or doing anything else for the sake of covering up the grime. Instead, we wear our dirt on our foreheads, because we trust what our God can do with dust.

In doing so, we are unburdened from the work of serving the relentless master that is our self-image and we begin the journey to freedom. We move not by what will make us look a certain way but by the callings of our hearts, imperfect though they may be, because this is where our treasure truly is. Amen.

## Overview

### Ashes in Public?

In today's gospel Jesus cautions us against public acts of piety—on the one day of the year we leave worship with a visible smudge on our foreheads, reminding everyone we see that we have been to church. What are you supposed to do, wipe the ashes off before stepping outside? Do you leave them on only to have the cashier at the grocery store say, "You've got something on your forehead"?

Of course Jesus does not tell us to refrain from all acts of public piety. What Jesus seems concerned with is the why, not the what. Why do you pray in public? Why do you give alms? Why do you fast? If appearing faithful is a way to build yourself up before others, then it is not faithfulness but hypocrisy. On the other hand, if praying over a meal in a restaurant is something you do because praying at meals is part of your faith, by all means bow your head and pray.

As the season of Lent begins each year, God's people are invited to take on three great disciplines: prayer, fasting, and alms-giving. You hear the invitation to prayer, fasting, and alms-giving in the reading from Joel. Jesus' words in the gospel remind us that our acts of faithfulness always come as a response to God's gifts. Remembering this gives a note of humility to all we do. Piety is not something to brag about. Piety is not something to be proud of. Piety is but acknowledgment of the one who first gave us everything.

Finally, Paul makes it clear, as if there were ever any question: we only become righteous in Jesus. We know grace only because Jesus becomes our sin. This is the grounding for everything we do throughout the holy days of Lent.

In Mark's Gospel Jesus and his three disciples come down from the mount. Jesus delivers a child from a dumb and deaf spirit. And the next thing to happen is that he teaches them outright: "

"30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' 32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask."

Luke's account is even more explicit. It has Jesus telling the Twelve,

"43b While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, he said to his disciples, 44 'Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.'"

Let these words sink into your ears. In other words, "Listen to me when I'm talking to you!"

God's chosen fast involves listening. It involves turning away from all of our competing inner voices to really hear the voice that speaks for God.

Last Sunday, just two days ago, I talked to you about listening.

I told you that from the time of the Transfiguration now into the Lenten journey, Jesus starts sharing with his intimates about his coming death. And what Jesus needs from them is to really listen and to really hear. He needs them to be aware and engaged and close by and tight with him as he now makes his pilgrimage to where he has never gone before.

I also pointed out the obvious that all of us together are going down a path where we have never gone before. So we, too, need to be listening saints—all the more tonight on Ash Wednesday, when we double-down on individual dedication to our Savior, and as we mull over the words, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return, and also as we seek to understand how we may continue to be growing together in our community. What priorities are we to tackle first? And then what? And then what?"

I said that it's all very exciting and terrifying at the same time.

Listen. We need to listen. And then make every moment count.

Because what we next hear and how we next respond and the path that we next take—"the road less travelled"—the road not yet travelled—that will make all the difference about who we are and where we go.

"Remember that you are dust"—these words are going to be spoken over you this evening when you receive the ashes on your forehead.

Tonight will be a night of listening.

Remember that you are dust. Remember that life is short. I desire to lead you to an experience of that this evening.

Because I am going to give you this amazing gift—a deep and satisfying fulfillment of remembering and returning. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

So please go with me in your imagination to almost 29 hours from now. The time is nearly midnight, about 5 minutes to the toll of the bell. You feel a deep settledness and an inner contentment and satisfaction that go beyond expression.

You know that all your sins are forgiven. You have been washed and cleansed at the baptismal font. You feel yourself, body, soul and spirit, being held perfectly, caringly, gently, securely in your heavenly Father's loving hands.

You relax into his touch. You even have a sense of eagerness and thrill, because you know that you are soon to be perfectly united together with him.

Pretend with me that at the last stroke of midnight tomorrow, you will gently, effortlessly, comfortably breathe out that final breath of life, and you will begin to know and experience that perfect fullness of Jesus that will require you an eternity in order discover.

Now please come back to this moment in time and consider you have only one day to remain on the planet. It's an amazing gift—the knowledge of your final day. How do you want to live your life for the next 24 plus hours? Where do you want to be? Where do you want to go, if anywhere? What do you want to do? And especially, especially, who are the people that you want to be with—that you want to be with you. Write down their names, or write down a name or two.

There is someone else or some ones who may particularly come to mind because you need to, you really need to be able to look them in the eye and say words you need to say, and words they need to hear: I LOVE YOU. At the thought of that expression, whose image flashes on the screen of your imagination? Write down the name of that person or persons.

There is someone else or some ones who may particularly come to mind because you need to, you really need to be able to look them in the eye and say words you need to say, and words they need to hear: I FORGIVE YOU. At the thought of that expression, whose image now flashes on the screen of your imagination? Write down the name of that person or persons.

There is someone or some ones who may particularly come to mind because you need to, you really need to be able to look them in the eye and say words you need to say, and words they need to hear: PLEASE FORGIVE ME. At the thought of that expression, whose image flashes on the screen of your imagination? Write down the name of that person or persons.

Finally, there is someone else or some ones who may particularly come to mind because you need to, you really need to be able to look them in the eye and say words you need to say, and words they need to hear: THANK YOU (for helping to make me the person I have become). At the thought of that expression, whose image flashes on the screen of your imagination? Write down the name of that person or persons.

You have been listening, and now you have your assignment for your so-called last day that's out ahead. There are some people, or there is one person that you are going make a special effort just to get together.

There are some people, or there is one person that you are going make a special effort just to say, I LOVE YOU.

There are some people, or there is one person that you are going make a special effort just to say, I FORGIVE YOU.

There are some people, or there is one person that you are going make a special effort just to say, PLEASE FORGIVE ME.

And there are some people, or there is one person that you are going make a special effort just to say, THANK YOU (for being in my life).

Remember that you are dust. Remember that life is short. Every moment needs to count. From tonight's reading, in matters of religion, every pious moment needs to count. In matters of relationship, every loving moment needs to count. We don't have the time or the luxury of pretending anything else. Amen.

We cannot do it alone. We cannot go it alone. The Lord himself both guides and lights our way. "Your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard."

And so we begin by freely admitting our faults, our errors and our limitations.

"Remember you are dust," the liturgy says, "and to dust you shall return."

Readings and Psalm

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Return to the Lord, your God

Isaiah 58:1-12 (alternate)

<sup>6</sup> *Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?*

<sup>7</sup> *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

<sup>8</sup> *Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator[a] shall go before you,  
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.*

<sup>9</sup> *Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

*If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,*

<sup>10</sup> *if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.*

<sup>11</sup> *The Lord will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,*

*like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail.*

<sup>12</sup> *Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.*

The fast that God chooses

Psalm 51:1-17

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. (Ps. 51:1)

2 Corinthians 5:20b--6:10

Now is the day of salvation

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

The practice of faith

We must do this in community.

I have been thinking about George Bailey.