

Ash Wednesday 2022, St. David's Episcopal, Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 6:1-6,16-21 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Our readings today drive home that why we do what we do matters. The Gospel reading may seem strange on a day when we smear ashes on our head and wear them around, marked by our Christianity, yet are told not to look dismal like the hypocrites and to wash our faces when we are fasting.

The Isaiah reading has even harsher things to say about fasting: “You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.” So why are we marking ourselves and what is the point of Lent?

Some churches might interpret passages like this differently than I do. For example, yesterday on Twitter, someone I follow mentioned that the first time she went to a Reformed Church in America on Ash Wednesday she was surprised that they served sausages afterwards, and that they did this intentionally as part of something called The Affair of the Sausages. I thought she was making this up but Googled it and discovered that there was something called The Affair of the Sausages. A Swiss printer in the sixteenth century fed sausage to his workers in the middle of Lent and was arrested for violating the fast. This encouraged the reformer Zwingli to preach a sermon in defense of the printer because Lent and fasting during Lent are not in the Bible. Reformers actively discouraged such practices for centuries, but many churches are rediscovering how meaningful Lenten practices can be.

Today's Old Testament reading comes towards the end of Isaiah, when the people of God are returning from exile and remembering who they are. That speaks to me at this point in our life at St. David's. We have slowly been opening up again. Last year, we didn't offer an Ash Wednesday service in person. We had a skeleton crew here—camera, lector, musicians, and me—and I instructed you all on how to put on your own ashes. Today, we will have smaller groups at two services, but I am grateful to get to physically impose ashes again and to say those familiar words to you: Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return. These words remind all of us who we are and where we came from and whose we are. God created Adam out of the dust. These bodies will one day be dust.

Even after two cancers, truly remembering that I will return to dust is hard to imagine. These hands that will impose ashes tonight will one day be dust. As a Christian, the act of receiving ashes has always been one of the most meaningful for me, and as a priest, it has been one of my favorite days of the year.

We've been through so much in the past two years. Some people have not been in this room for two years. The exiles in Isaiah had not been in their holy land for a generation, and at the time of today's reading they had been released to return: but what they came back to wasn't what they'd left. They left a thriving place but returned to ruins. Imagine that.

Imagine that and think about where we are now as a church. We are not in ruins. We have much to be excited about and grateful for. But we are not the same church we were two years ago. So much has changed. We have to remember who we are and what we are called to do.

Lent is a time of repentance and purification, but when we listen to Matthew and Isaiah, we remember that why we do what we do matter. If we leave here with ashes so that we can be seen by others and impress them with our holiness, we would be better off washing our face right after the service. If, however, you are kind of embarrassed to go around with ashes on your forehead, then leaving them on could be a spiritual growing edge. But these outward signs aren't as important to God as our inward yearnings. Of course we aren't perfect; but, are we trying?

And even more importantly: how do we treat others? We hear in Isaiah "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers." How do you treat those who serve you, who work for you, who worship with you?

The Lord said to Isaiah, "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? 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?"

If you have not chosen a Lenten discipline this year, that's a great list to study. Where do you see bonds of injustice, and how can you work to loosen them? Where do you see people hungry or homeless and what small thing can you personally do for or with them?

Every time I read scripture, something hits me that didn't before. This year in this passage, I have been thinking about that part "not to hide yourself from your own kin." It strikes me in a time when we as a church family have been necessarily separate from each other in many ways.

Are we finally at a time when we can be safely coming together, to see each other and feed off each other's presence? I was disheartened after Christmas when we had to restrict so much of worship again and have been grateful with every little new thing we can do to open up again, while also trying to stay safe. Some things I doubt I will ever feel safe doing again, like shaking hands, routine hugs. Washing feet. How can we balance staying safe without hiding from each other as church "kin"? How can we open ourselves up to each other and grow as Christians?

How can we resist the temptation to hide ourselves from our own kin?