

Yr. C, Ash Wednesday
March 2, 2022
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1303 Words

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

Ash Wednesday is the wide-open door, right in front of you. It's the passenger car on a train with plenty of empty seats still available. It's the subway car—a smooth, but decisive step from the platform where you're standing. The doors are wide open—and a voice calls out, inviting you to come aboard.

“Shout out, *do not hold back!*” says the LORD to his prophet, Isaiah. “Lift up your voice like a (loud, blaring) trumpet.”

(Paraphrase)

“Tell my people they've missed the whole point. It's not really fasting when you're only serving your *own* spiritual interest. It's not fasting when you push your essential workers to the breaking point. It's not fasting when you quarrel and fight.”

Isaiah is like a conductor, calling the ancient people of Israel to get on board with God's clear vision of holiness—a vision of justice, equity, and peace for *all people*. Isaiah is *still calling* modern, faithful Europeans, Americans, Africans, and Asians to get on board.

(Paraphrase)

“The fast which *I choose*,” says the LORD, “is for *you* to loosen the bonds of injustice from the vulnerable. The fast I choose is for *you* to undo the cords of the back-breaking yokes which saddle the weak with burdens they will never be able to carry. The fast *I want to see*,” says the LORD, “is for *you* to demand that oppressed people get to taste freedom as much as you do.”

“I want to see you share your food with hungry people.” says the LORD. “I'd like to see you providing shelter for the homeless and for the refugees who are desperate to have a roof over their heads. And to give warm clothing to the poor who are freezing.”

“The Bottom line is this:” says the LORD, “Do not hide yourself from other peoples' problems. Don't duck when you should be standing up for the vulnerable. Don't keep silent when you should be speaking out for the weak. Don't be tight-fisted when you should be reaching forth your hands in love to the poor.”

“*Then*,” says the LORD, “your light shall break forth like the dawn and rise up in the darkness.”

“*Then*,” says the LORD, “(*your* healing ministry) shall spring up like a watered garden.”

“*That is when* you will be like a fresh, natural spring whose waters never fail.”

“*Then*,” says the LORD, “I will listen to you. When *you* cry for help, I will answer—I will say, ‘Here I am.’”

Are we ‘on board’ with all of that? It sounds like it might involve choosing sides in difficult and tense situations. It sounds like it might involve taking a stand or speaking out. It might get...*political*—I mean, let's not be naïve. All things pertaining to power and money are *always* political.

There is a beautiful, ancient promise embedded in the prophesy of Isaiah. God promises that *we can help* raise up new foundations out of the dust of destruction. God promises that the righteous shall be called repairers of the breach—repairers of all the senseless, devastating, destruction caused by immoral oppressors, and their arrogant friends.

God promises that mere mortals *like us* can earn reputations as restorers of streets to live in. Imperfect people like us can become healers for neighborhoods, cities, and even countries torn asunder by violence, greed, abuse, or simply negligence...*if*...if we are willing to get on board with God’s crystal-clear vision of justice, equity, and peace served up *by the righteous*, and particularly for the benefit of the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable.

Into such an enormous challenge as this...into such a demanding time as this, the LORD has called a Jewish comedian—Volodymyr Zelensky—who first became President of Ukraine, and now has become an internationally acclaimed profile in courage, standing up to a coward hiding out far behind his 200,000 soldiers, more than 500 comfortable miles away from the battles.

Thank God most of us are not called upon to show this much strength or this much courage. It feels like it would be too hard...too frightening. I mean, it’s hard to stand up to bullies. It’s scary to speak out to the people who hold *all the cards*, when you’re speaking on behalf of the *other people* who hold very few...if *any* cards.

It was probably hard for Isaiah to stand up and speak out to his people. We *know* it was hard for Jesus to do it—the first time *he* stood up and spoke out about God’s crystal-clear vision of justice, equity, and peace; his own congregation tried to kill him...literally tried to throw him off a cliff.

So, let’s lean in and hear the *Good News* of Jesus Christ from *another of his sermons*...the Sermon on the Mount. “Don’t practice your piety for other people to see,” he says.

(Paraphrase)

“Don’t toot your own horn when you give money to the poor. Don’t pray like it’s all for show. Don’t use your fasting face as a gimmick so other people can see how holy you are.”

Jesus offers us a ‘common sense spirituality.’ It’s pretty straightforward, according to Jesus. Essentially, he is saying this: “The door is open to a life lived according to God’s vision. The door is open to embark on a journey with God’s people to help form a beloved community—which offers liberty, justice, and peace for all people.

When you hear the call, just get on board...along with everyone else who chooses to embark on this journey of faith.”

Following the example of Christ and journeying with other faithful people will give us all the strength we need. Following Christ and journeying with other faithful people will supply us with all the courage we need. We are not in this alone. When we get on board with the life God wants for all his beloved children, we will be forgiven, restored, nourished, and renewed to perform good—even *heroic*—ministries in Christ’s holy name.

Here’s the thing. God knows how to read human hearts like the back of his hand. God knows when we’re serious about standing up for justice on behalf of the weak. God knows when we are genuine about offering mercy for the poor. God knows when we’re honest about walking humbly with him...as the vulnerable mortals that we are.

It’s pretty obvious when you show up on *this day* to remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Ash Wednesday is our day not only to remember our ending. It's also our day to make a new *beginning*, a fresh start.

In just a moment I'm going to invite you to step forward and get on board with a holy Lent, journeying in the Way of Love with Jesus Christ our Lord. We get to use these next forty days to prepare ourselves for Easter Life. Near the end of my invitation, I'm going to name seven spiritual practices. Don't pick one...pick three or four—*at least*. If you think you might forget the invitation, take your bulletin home so you can read it over again. (We printed enough for everyone.)

Look, today is not just about ashes. It's not about outward, visible, superficial signs. It's about listening—*and responding*—to the call of the prophet, Isaiah, and to the call of Jesus Christ, our LORD.

And the call is this: God hates nothing or *nobody* whom God has made. God *wants* to forgive the sins of all who are willing to acknowledge and lament them. God wants nothing more than for us to climb aboard with the communion of saints and become living members of the Body of his Son on a journey toward beloved community.

Today, the door is wide open...and you will *not* be travelling alone.

Amen.