Ash Wednesday. February 14, 2024. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA. Isaiah 58:1-12, Psalm 51 and 103, 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21.

1 "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. 2 "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. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 5 "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. 6 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.
16 "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites; for they disfigure their faces as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who sees in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Tonight the altar and chancel are covered with purple, the color of repentance and of the kingly robe hung around Jesus' beaten shoulders during his mock trial.

You and I also will soon look different; our faces will bear the ashes of repentance, the ashes of sadness, mourning and death. The solemn words "You are dust" bring us back to our origins and take us forward to our earthly ending. God created us from dust and we will return to dust when we die. We hear this powerful word spoken despite our most eager desire to deny both our roots and our mortality.

These are not heavenly ashes; these ashes pull us down to earth. Jesus was always reminding his disciples that he would die, and they never wanted to hear it. When we talk about death, people often are uncomfortable and try to change the subject.

As a child I remember my worst fear was to see a skeleton, such a stark image of death.

But focusing on our own death for a few moments and on the deaths of those with whom we worship this evening, may help us to focus on our LIFE today. One man when he saw the ashes on his wife's forehead, resolved to treat her more lovingly, felt remorse for having taken her life for granted.

A retired surgeon when he learned he had stage 4 cancer, asked a friend to help him build a pine box to use as his coffin before he would be cremated. His wife was upset, his friends uncomfortable. But here's what he said when he finished the coffin, "The project has smoothed the rough edges of my thoughts. It's pretty much impossible to feel anger at someone for driving too slowly in front of you in traffic when you've just come from sanding your own coffin. Coveting material objects, holding on to old grudges, failing to pause and see the grace in strangers – all equally foolish. While the coffin is indeed a reminder of what awaits us all, its true message is to live every moment to its greatest potential."[1]

The ashes on the faces of your loved ones, your friends, your children, your parents can help us remember that everything on this earth is transitory. We have no abiding city, no abiding community of faith, no abiding home.

Perhaps this reality will be a way for God to pull us closer. As we repent this night, we look Reality in the face and ask God to bring about a change, to re-create us. That's part of the task of Lenten meditation and reflection. Otherwise we will be putting on ashes to be seen by others, giving money so that others will praise us, praying with empty phrases, complaining about the things we have given up for Lent in order to have others feel sorry for us while we secretly hope to gain their admiration. A Valentine love-letter from God might read, "Beloved, my darling, you are more messed up than you think, but you are mine forever. Love, God."

Some of us priests have an almost irresistible urge to trace a heart instead of a cross on your foreheads. And why not? The love of God is at the heart of all our worship! From the outside looking in, the practice of imposing ashes and saying, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" could seem morbid. That might be true if I simply left a smudge on your forehead. But I try hard to trace a recognizable cross. No symbol of God's love is more powerful than the cross. And that cross empowers us to love one another.

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[1] Jeffrey M. Piehler. NY Times, February 2, 2014. "Ashes to Ashes, but First a Nice Pine Box."

The invisible cross marked on your forehead when you were baptized will never be taken from you. God's promise of Grace, to love you, will not fail. Tonight we will trace ashes on the spot where your baptizer traced the invisible cross. Those ashes will be washed away, but the invisible cross of baptismal blessing will always remain.

God has not called us to an impossible journey, although we cannot yet see its ending, its perils or its path. For this journey, God provides food. The body and blood of Jesus. We are not denied Holy Communion tonight or on Sunday. And God provides companions to share time and good counsel. Food and companions for the journey. We pray for the faith to go forth with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that God's gracious and forgiving hand is leading us and God's love supporting us, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.