

Ash Wednesday Sermon: Isaiah 58

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Lent begins with death. It's the middle of winter. The trees are bare, the nights are long, and everything is covered in snow. And we receive a cross of ashes on our foreheads. We're reminded, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." These ashes are the burned remains of the Palm Sunday palms. They marked the beginning of the end for Jesus. And they're the remains of the flags that hung here above us on the Feast of All Saints, inscribed with the names of the deceased. They remind us of all the death we have experienced.

40 days from now, we will again make the sign of the cross, this time with oil, on the foreheads of the people being baptized. Baptism, too, is death. The word itself comes from the Greek work baptidzo, which meant "to drown." Through baptism, we die to our old selves and to the ways of the world. And when we mark each other with the cross today, we are marking ourselves as dead.

The cross is not just a benign golden stick that we carry through church. It's not just a habitual gesture we make. It's powerful and it's frightening.

After I graduated from college, I moved to New York for a year of service. It was my first time ever in New York. I took a confusing bus ride from Laguardia Airport to St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Harlem, where I would be living. And when I arrived at the door, I met Mercedes. She was an African American woman in her fifties, a little bit frail looking, but totally welcoming. Despite her small frame, she lugged the suitcase containing a year's worth of stuff up the somewhat scary looking staircase.

Mercedes was the face of St. Mary's. She spent every morning and afternoon handing out mail to people who received mail at the church- mostly, people who were homeless. And she presided over the informal clothing bank on the picnic table in the yard. Once, when Andrew came in wearing nothing but a fleece jacket in the middle of winter, she scouted out a heavier coat for him.

Shortly after I left New York, Mercedes died very quickly of lung cancer. Six of seven diesel bus depots in Manhattan are located in Harlem, and diesel exhaust has been linked to lung cancer. Asthma, too. 25% of kids in Harlem have asthma. Difficulty breathing is no uncommon thing. What's more, there's a health center on the corner, where people received free preventive care. It closed a few years ago for renovations. newly renovated health care center on the corner. It never reopened. The city said there wasn't enough funding. They found money for a security guard to watch the building around the clock, but no money for doctors to staff the clinic.

The prayer flag with Mercedes' name that hung right there on the Feast of All Saints is mixed in with the ashes we receive today.

Lent begins with death. But it doesn't end there. The cross doesn't only mean crucifixion. We know that, come Easter, Jesus rose from the dead. The ashes don't just mean dust. Those palms we burned symbolize victory. And those prayer flags? Hope that those we love are with God. Where there's a big enough font, the people being baptized rise, dripping, from death, from the water, to begin new life.

Our hope is not just in death, but also in despair, the kind of despair Isaiah's community was feeling. After almost 50 years, the exile in Babylon has ended. The people can return to their homeland. But many stayed behind- too old to make the trip, too young to have known Israel, unwilling to face the destruction. The ones who do return are economically oppressed and they face the daunting task of rebuilding their temple and their lives. This isn't the glorious return Isaiah predicted. It feels like God has abandoned them.

But Isaiah has hope. He believes, deeply, that God will not abandon the people. But the people have to keep up their end of the bargain. They must respond to God's love by loosing the bonds of injustice, and letting the oppressed go free, sharing their bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless into their homes. In the midst of despair, Isaiah calls for charity and justice. And in the answering of his call, there's hope. Isaiah prophesies that the light of the people will shine in the darkness. The ruins will be rebuilt, the streets will be restored, and generations of Israelites will be raised up.

We try to reject Isaiah's idea that God punishes us, or that God abandons us when we turn away. But our despair is as real as it was for the people of Israel. In the midst of our neighbors' suffering, and the suffering of people across the world, we can feel hopeless. And our despair can shake our faith. Where is our God in suffering? Is God indifferent? Is God God? God does care, Isaiah answers. It's clear in what God asks of us. God wants justice for God's people and not sacrifice for Godself. God cares about people and not penance. In fact, God rejects sackcloth and ashes entirely, rejects giving stuff up for the sake of giving stuff up entirely. The fast that please God is charity and justice for God's people is what's important, because God loves us. This is reason to hope.

And we believe that Isaiah's prophecy was right: the light did come to shine on the people in darkness, and the light was Christ. He inaugurated a new life, a kingdom of justice and love. It's not yet fully present. But we bring our present reality closer to the kingdom when we answer Isaiah's call for charity and for justice. And this is reason to hope.

I have hope for Mercedes' resurrection. And I have hope for justice for the people of Harlem. I have hope because the people of St Mary's Church have heeded Isaiah's call. They've organized to fight the environmental racism that spews diesel fumes into their community. And they've organized to reopen the local health clinic. And I have hope that, in entrusting you with Mercedes' story, that you, too, will resist injustice like this when you see it.

Lent begins with death and despair. But the symbols of cross and ashes also hold life and hope. Christ brought new life from death. In its fullness, this new life is the kingdom. We embrace this new life in baptism. In it, we are for each other as God is for us. And this means practicing charity and doing justice to bring our broken world closer to the kingdom.

Before the night is over, our ashes will fade and be washed away. But the cross will not fade. We will continue to hold it up, and to make its sign over ourselves. The call for justice will not fade. Here in Chicago, our oppressed are the 50% of CPS freshman who don't finish high school. Here in Chicago, our hungry are the 400 hungry neighbors come to our doors every Tuesday. And here in Chicago, our homeless number 73,000. This Lent, let the cross remind us that Christ turned death into new life, despair into hope, and that, as his followers, we are called

to do the same. So I invite you to the observance of a Holy Lent by practicing charity and doing justice, the fast that is pleasing to God. Amen.