

McCabe United Methodist Church

Lent 2016

“Cross My Heart, Cont'd”

Ash Wednesday Meditation on Luke 4:1-5 & Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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Welcome to one of the most depressing days of the church year.

Seriously, Ash Wednesday can be pretty rough. I mean, in just a few minutes, you're all going to be invited forward to receive the sign of the cross in ashes on your foreheads. As Nurse Jane and I place the ash on your foreheads, we will be saying these words: “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

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These words offer an intentional reminder that, God created humanity out of the dust of the earth...and that, one day, each and every one of us will die and will then, somehow, return to the dust from which we came.

The ashes we put on our foreheads this night are like that dust. And we don't simply *think about* the ashes – we don't simply *look at* the ashes – no...on this day, we physically put them onto our bodies: as a reminder to ourselves of our mortality, and as a reminder to all who see us that they, too, will one day return to the dust from which they came.

Like I said: welcome to one of the most depressing days of the church year.

On Ash Wednesday we are indeed reminded of our mortality.

Not only that, but we are reminded that the reality of death itself is wrapped-up in the reality of human sin ...that, had the first humans not sinned, they would have lived forever, in paradise with God.

The season of Lent is a 40-day march toward the cross of Good Friday: the cross on which our Savior died *because of* our human sin. In fact, the story we just heard Jim read about Jesus' 40-day period of testing in the desert is actually a foreshadowing of the cross.

When the devil tested and tempted him for 40 days in the desert, Jesus was experiencing a glimpse of what he'd eventually experience on the cross...though surely nothing the devil tempted him with in the desert would compare to the temptation he'd have on the cross – the temptation to *come down* from the cross...the temptation to save himself the agony of that particular death.

With the cross of Good Friday in mind – and with our human sin and frailty in mind – we look to the season of Lent as a time of confession...a time to look into our own minds and hearts...a time to reflect on the sin in our lives...a time to recognize that the natural consequence of human sin has been, and continues to be, death.

“Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

These words of Ash Wednesday are perfect for the day and they can be powerful to hear. But...thankfully, they are not the *only* words we hear on this particular day of the church year.

We *will* spend time confessing our sin through the words of Psalm 51... and we *will* hear those words about dust as we receive the ashes onto our foreheads. But...we will also hear the words of the Communion prayer; words that remind us of God's grace to the world, from Creation to the end of time.

And, as depressing as this particular day can be – with its reminder of our mortality – we must never forget how this season of Lent marches us toward not only the cross of Good Friday, but also toward the empty tomb of Easter Sunday.

If you worshiped with us during Advent and Christmas, you may recall our worship theme for that time was “Cross My Heart.”

Advent and Christmas are times when we focus on how, in sending Jesus into this world, God fulfilled a *promise* that had been made centuries earlier – a promise to give the people a Messiah who would bring mercy and salvation.

With the idea of “promise” in mind, I couldn't help but think about the phrase “cross my heart” – a phrase children have been known to use as the sign of a promise: “Cross my heart, hope to die...” That phrase seemed so fitting for Advent and Christmas because, of course, the baby born in the manger grows up to be the Savior dying on the cross.

The promise of Advent and Christmas is a promise from God's own heart. And, as we now journey through the season of *Lent*, it's so fitting for us to revisit and to continue the “Cross My Heart” theme.

It's been said that, to have a child, is to have your heart walking around outside your body...vulnerability at its most poignant.

Well...in Jesus Christ – God's Son – God's own heart was walking around among us in this world. And, on Good Friday, God's own heart was nailed to a cross. On Good Friday, God's own heart was bleeding for the world.

The season of Lent is a 40-day journey into God's own heart.

In order to faithfully journey through this holiest of seasons, we must look into *our own* hearts – searching for sin and asking God to transform our sin into blessing...because, of course, that's what God did on Easter; God took the sin of Good Friday's cross and transformed it into the blessed good news of Easter's empty tomb.

And so, even on this most depressing of church days – even on this day when we are firmly reminded of our sin and mortality – there *is* good news.

Though we are dust – and though we will return to dust – through the gift of Easter, we are given the blessing of hope in all things...even hope in the midst of death. Thanks be to God