



Ash Wednesday
March 2, 2022

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Chris

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ.
Amen.

When I turned on the news last Wednesday night, just seven days ago, after coming home from work, the Russian invasion of Ukraine had begun. I stood in front of the television as sounds and images went swirling before my eyes. On TikTok – a video App where everyday people can post in real-time, I watched videos of bombs exploding and people scrambling for shelter in underground train stations. I couldn't help but feel a sense of déjà vu. I remembered doing the same thing during the invasion of Kuwait when I was in High School. And on 9/11 as a newly ordained pastor in California. And during the invasion of Iraq when I was newly married. I remember the strange feeling that I needed to pay attention, even though there really wasn't anything more to learn. I remember feeling like I needed to do something – even though there wasn't really anything to do. I remember feeling powerless and exhausted in the overwhelming fog of it all. And maybe you do too.

“The minute-by-minute updates about the Russian invasion of Ukraine overwhelm many of us. At the same time, we are trying everything to find our way out of the pandemic and its aftermath. At this point, we are mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted. We are a tired people. We are a tired world. We are a tired church,” writes Bishop Constanze Hagmaier of the South Dakota Synod of the ELCA. “It can easily feel as if we have nothing more to give. But we are not alone in our weariness, even when we have no words left to say. The Apostle Paul reminds us that in our weariness, the Spirit is with us: “For the moment we get tired in the waiting, God’s Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don’t know how or what to pray, it doesn’t matter. God’s Spirit does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. The Spirit knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our condition, and keeps us present before God. That’s why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.”

And now here on this Ash Wednesday, we are caught-up in the sights and sounds of Lent swirling before our eyes. The music carries a minor key; the altar and sanctuary are alive with purple fabric both acknowledging the royalty of David’s line as Jesus begins his journey to cross and throne while at the same time tempering our joy with a muted display of color that somehow binds our joy while we wander into the wilderness with our Savior for a time. It is in the wilderness that we find



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ourselves most willing to turn to God – to depend on God – to allow ourselves to beg and plead with God for that which we believe will save us from whatever tragedy engulfs us. And in our wilderness moments, we turn to God – we pray.

“9 “Pray then in this way,” Jesus says. “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. ¹⁰Thy kingdom come thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.^[b] And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

It is an ancient pattern that the people of God turn to the words of those gone before them. When the unfathomable finds its way into our lives, when we are without words, God’s Spirit invites us to pick up the words of those gone before us and make them our own. “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” Those words have quieted the sobbing, gut-wrenching tears of those who sit in vigil at bedside as every breath is counted. I have stood at open graves and invited others to pray those words with me – in the biting wind of winter and dehydrating heat of summer. Holding the hands of someone who is broken by a life-changing moment of despair, the words of the Lord’s prayer have brought a sense of calm into all-encompassing storm. At the bedside of my mother – at the edge of a lake – at the hospital – the funeral home – the entrance to the Steaming Cup – kneeling on the floor of this very sanctuary. “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done. On earth as it is in heaven.” Those words console my shattered heart. And when I am broken, those same words give comfort. Not because everything is fixed, but because the One who taught me those words, promises also to listen to me when I speak them.

Early on in my ministry, I came to understand the power of this prayer. While serving my twelve-week chaplaincy at a psychiatric hospital in Salem, OR – the four student chaplains tended a rotation of Sunday morning worship for patients who were allowed to leave their units to attend worship. Most Sundays brought 10-15 patients. Some were able to communicate well – others ignored you when you spoke to them. None were considered dangerous to the pastors in training. One man sat in the front row each Sunday, an older gentleman who ignored me each and every Sunday. For the entire hour of worship, he would sit with his head down and often with a tiny thread of drool hanging from his mouth. He would make no sound – nor would he acknowledge what was happening around



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him in worship until the moment we began to pray the Lord's prayer. And then he would raise his head and he would pray – loudly and clearly, “Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Every week without fail – this man prayed those words. And as soon as the prayer was finished, he would return to his head down posture and the drool would resume. What power the words of the prayer held for him.

We may be a tired world. A tired people. A tired church. But God does not leave us. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. ²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. Today we begin our forty-day journey toward Easter with a day of fasting and repentance. Marking our foreheads with dust, we acknowledge that we die and return to the earth. At the same time, the dust traces the life-giving cross forever marked on our foreheads at baptism. While we journey through Lent to return to God, we have already been reconciled to God through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We humbly pray for God to make our hearts clean while we rejoice that “now is the day of salvation.” Returning to our baptismal call, we more intentionally bear the fruits of mercy and justice in the world.

And today our baptismal calling to bear fruits of mercy and justice in the world, demands that we pray...

God of peace, our hearts are heavy and our brains can barely keep up with the breaking news. We don't know what to say or what to do in a world so wounded. So we come to you with hearts heavy for all who sit in the crossfire of violence and acts of war. Holy One, be with the people of Ukraine. With the mothers who carry babies to subway shelters. With the fathers who hold their heads in their hands. With the children who absorb the traumas of violent acts of powerful men. God of peace, hear our prayers for a warring world and all who are vulnerable in it. Tend the aching and soothe the fearful. Make us instruments of your peace. Where sacred symphony may invite us to rhythms of grace inviting us to dance, celebrating that evil has lost its sting, now and forevermore. Amen.

I read a book a couple of weeks ago. A small miracle in these first months of 2022 with more funerals than I prefer to count so early in the new year. The title was, “All the Light We Cannot See.”



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And the story is told of a young blind woman named Marie who navigates the beginning of and journey through World War II in the country of France. The story was well worth the 530 pages, but it was the last line of the second to the last page that has carried me through this last week of unknown threat and tragedy for people I have never met, but am called to care for as a disciple of our Savior Jesus. At the end of the book, Marie has had children of her own and her grandson Michel leads her down a road in Paris. She can hear the click, click of her grandson playing a video game and then he makes a noise and announces that he is dead. "He has killed me," her grandson says of his opponent. "In the game?" His grandmother asks. "Yes," her grandson says, "But I can always begin again." A worthy reminder for all of us as we enter these days of wandering in the wilderness in the season of Lent. "Every hour, Marie thinks, someone for whom the war was a memory falls out of the world. We rise again in the grass. In the flowers. In songs," she says. "You may leave me here, Michel." His grandmother says. "You can find your own way," Michel asks his grandmother. "Of course." His grandmother responds.

The same is true for each of you this day. Left in the wilderness, you can find your own way. Of course you can. Jesus has given you all that you need to guide through the wilderness. And the way you begin is with these words, "Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." I am pretty sure you know the rest. People of God, peace be with you on your journey. Amen.