



Sunday February 14, 2024
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 (Ash Wednesday)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

How can it be Ash Wednesday already? Because it feels like only yesterday that we were immersed in all the joy and wonder of the sights, sounds, and celebrations of Christmas and the miraculous birth of our Savior?

Well, I wish I could say that I'm surprised, but the truth is, for quite some time, I've been reflecting on the fragility of life, my own mortality, and looking ahead to the obligations of Lent calling us to sacrifice, along with the recurring Lenten themes that point out our sinfulness and invite us to repent and change course. Then there's *this day*, and the cross of ashes that marks our foreheads as a visible and tangible symbol of all these things – so, if I'm being completely honest, the truth is, *"I don't want to do Lent this year!"*

Now, maybe that's something a pastor isn't supposed to say, but I did, and I mean what I said. *"I don't want to do Lent this year!"* Do you? Because, if so, then good for you. But I don't. And I don't know if this is just a moment of confession or simply a description of where I'm at these days and all that I'm walking with.

People that I deeply care about facing difficult health and financial challenges, others are struggling in their marriages, some are searching for meaning and direction, and others feel lost in the desert after the death of someone they love. Add to that a political climate that's setting the stage for more division, the destruction of creation because of our carelessness, and a world filled with senseless violence. The bottom line is, ***"I just don't want to do Lent this year."***

We take time tonight to pray for the courage and strength to acknowledge our sinfulness with complete honesty, and then follow that up with our half-hearted attempts to turn away from our wretchedness so that we might be worthy of God's forgiveness. And then, we reluctantly sign this prayer with our "Amen." But I don't want us to obsess about complaining or mourning our sinfulness, or whatever it is we think somehow makes us bad, defective, or not enough. Because Lent has never been about going to those places – instead, it's always been about growing out of and leaving those places. In fact, the word Lent in Latin literally means "Spring" – the season of new life and growing out of the darkness and dormancy of winter into the light of spring.

And while the holy season of Lent invites us to step into our Lenten journey through forty days of self-examination, prayer, fasting, self-denial, reading and meditating on God's Holy Word – and ultimately repentance. All I hear, are the old voices in my head asking, *"What are you giving up for Lent this year? What will you take on? What are you going to do? Be good Tony. You need to do something lenty."* And maybe you hear those voices too.

However, I don't want us to turn Lent into just another self-improvement program as if we're nothing more than just the sum of what we've done and left undone. Tonight our foreheads are marked with ashes, a sign of our mortality and repentance and we *"remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return."* But you know what, I don't want or need any more ashes in my life. Do you? Because I suspect most of us are already feeling burnt up or burned out.

We've come to the edge of our limitations again and again. We know what it's like to be mortal and powerless. We've struggled with feelings of not being enough, of being unworthy – we've grieved as we've watched our hopes and dreams get crushed and we've watched helplessly as loved ones die before our very eyes. So forgive me, but maybe this year we don't need another reminder of death.

Maybe what we really need is a reminder to live more fully before we die and the promise that death does not have the final word.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that Lent and our rituals and practices don't have value or meaning; because they absolutely do. What we do is important. I just don't want us to do Lent in the same old, familiar, and comfortable way. I want to believe that Lent is supposed to change more than just a few of our bad habits and the color of my stole.

I don't want us to *just get through* Lent this year. I want Lent *to get through to us*. I don't want us to *just do* Lent this year. I want Lent to *do something* life changing in us. And I don't want Ash Wednesday to



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just be a reflection of the ashes of our life, because if it's not also a calling us to rise up from the ashes then it's incomplete. Listen to this:

"You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."

How do you like that? What does it bring up for you? Those are the first few lines of Mary Oliver's poem "Wild Geese." And after I read it, I wondered, *"What if this was our Lenten journey this year?"* *"You do not have to be good."* I don't think anyone has ever said that to me. What about you? It's not that I'm against being good, and I don't think the poet is saying that it's okay to be bad. I want to be good, and I hope you do too. But maybe that's not the goal of Lent.

What if Lent, the way of Jesus, and the gospel are about more than just being good? What if they're more about wholeness and abundant life? What if *this* is how we approached Lent this year? And if we did, then I wonder what it would offer us and what it would ask of us. To be honest, I don't have a clue where it would take us, but we could certainly spend the next forty days together finding out.

"You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting." I wish I had known that when I was younger, don't you? How many miles have you and I walked on our knees through the desert, repenting and trying to gain approval or be worthy enough?

Knowing this saves me from stepping into a Lenten journey of self-punishment in the hope of a divine reward. Is that really who we think God is or what God wants? This line in the poem cautions me not to devote forty days of my life to giving up something – chocolate, complaining, cursing, junk food, laziness, or whatever, only to take it back up again on Easter morning. In this, I risk changing my behavior but not my life.

"You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves." This is what I want for Lent. I want to discover *"the soft animal of my body."* It's that tender, vulnerable, and deeply human part of me that loves. And in today's gospel from Matthew, Jesus calls that part – the heart. And all this has me thinking that perhaps Lent is a journey to discover, uncover, or recover our heart.

What is it that you and I are giving ourselves over to? What do we really love? What are our treasures? And where are our hearts?

Jesus reminds us that one's heart and treasure cannot be separated. *"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* The heart follows one's treasures.

And when I name my treasures, that's when I have to face up to myself and, for better or worse, acknowledge what I've given myself to and the direction they've taken my life. Sometimes I think it would be easier to be good, and less painful to just *"walk on my knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting."* But like I said earlier, I don't want to do Lent this year.

What are you treasuring and giving your heart to these days? And where is that taking your life? Some treasures have lasting power and eternal value, others, not so much. Some are worth holding on to. Others we need to let go of regardless of how much we think we love or need them.

If we want to know where God's heart is, then all we need to do is look at what God treasures. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."* Jesus gave himself to be fully human so that he would know the fullness of our human condition. He gave himself to humility so that we would know our true value. To forgiveness so that we would know the joy of restoration. To inclusion so we would know welcome and acceptance. To kindness so we would know the depth of connection. To compassion so we would know rest and reassurance. Jesus gave himself over to death on a cross so the gift of eternal life would be ours forever.

My friends, learning to love and learning what to love, learning what to hold on to and what to let go of – that's the real work of Lent. That's when Lent gets through to me. That's when I stop doing Lent and Lent begins doing something transformative in me. That's the holy Lent that I want – for myself and for all of us. Amen.