

Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2021  
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

**Let us pray: May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our healer, our redeemer. Amen.**

**This year has taught me**, and I suspect it's taught many of us, a lot about what it means to be human.

**COVID is so wily, so capricious.**

We can apply our best science, and still people are snatched away with startling speed.

**The stains of racism run deep in our institutions and communities.**

The breach is wide in many places,  
a complex terrain in most,  
and racism is at once systemic and deeply personal.

**The painful reality of isolation wears us down,**

festered anxiety,  
heightening our yearning,  
shifting our view of the world and one another.

**The losses—of loved ones, of routines, of milestones,**

the losses of flexibility and freedoms,  
the losses of identity and stability,  
they add up.

They are felt with grief that leaks out around the desire for normal in a time that is anything but normal.

**Like it or not, this year, really, has taught us not simple about being human,**

but about what it means to be mortal.

To be mortal in relationship with other mortals,

To be mortal in the loving care of our God, creator of the universe, sustainer of our very souls.

**We live, we die.**

We do our best, oh, we try,

and yet we fall short,  
sinning by what we have done and what we have left undone.  
And, and.... we are renewed, restored, forgiven to try again.  
Really, forgiven to live, held in a grace that we mortals can scarcely comprehend or accept.

**Our gospel this evening** often strikes me as solitary:

when you pray, go into your room and shut the door,  
pray to your God who is in secret, and your God who sees in secret will reward you.  
Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

**But in those words, and in our distance,** I've been musing about how we are together,  
how we desperately need one another.

Isaiah reminds us of our responsibility to each other.

Don't just keep the fast, that's not the call, Isaiah says,  
but rather the call is to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free.

Indeed, to be mortal together, to honor one another in our needs and in our gifts,  
in our desperate cries and in our greatest possibility,  
all the while standing before God.

**Pastor Barbara and I tagged teamed today,**

each spending a big portion of the day in this very sanctuary where I now sit.  
A number of you dropped by,  
praying in the stillness and the cello music,  
sharing conversation,  
hearing those life-giving promises: ***this is the body of Christ given for you,***  
***this is the blood of Christ shed for you,***  
marking the dusty, ashy cross on your forehead, as another mortal names that humble,  
catch-your-breath, bring-you-to-your-knees truth:

***Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.***

We kept our distance, and yet we needed one another.

We needed one another, just as surely as we need to worship in community  
and come together now across the computers and screens and phone lines tonight.

**I kept remembering** how Pauline had come by the church to lovingly prepare the altar for Lent,  
how last week the Kufus and the Tetlies teamed up to prepare the ashes for this Ash Wednesday.  
Typically, traditionally on Ash Wednesday we use ash from the palms from last year's Palm Sunday.  
We remember how with the crowds so long ago, in one breath we cry Hosanna, and in the next Crucify him.  
We are so very human, so very fallible, so in need of a savior.  
Lacking palms, this year we are blessed by ash from local oaks,  
oaks that once warmed the house and then were carefully sifted and divided,  
prepared in packets for our use.  
They took such care!

As much as we are drawn to the solitary moments with God,  
we also need one another's labors of love,  
one another's deep and abiding prayers,  
one another's insight and encouragement to be about  
facing down oppression and welcoming Christ's reign.

**The great prophet Isaiah reminds** us that when we follow that call to share our bread.  
Then our healing shall spring up.  
Then God will guide us continually.  
Then our needs will be met in the parched places, with springs of water that do not fail.  
Then you we are called repairers of the breach, restorer of streets to live in.

**Dearly beloved,** on this night of nights I am reminded again of our humanity, our mortality.  
And I am reminded of the powerful ways, even at distance, that together we come before Jesus,  
Beggars, every one of us,  
We come crying out for forgiveness,  
trusting the grace that tenderly holds us in this life and the next.  
Thanks be to God. Amen.