

“Practice A Holy Lent” Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Rev. Michele Ward Ash Wednesday February 17, 2021
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

*All those days
you felt like dust,
like dirt,
as if all you had to do
was turn your face
toward the wind
and be scattered
to the four corners*

*or swept away
by the smallest breath
as insubstantial—*

*did you not know
what the Holy One
can do with dust?*

The words of Jesus come to us while we are gathered separately yet together. How different is our gathering tonight from the setting of the Sermon on the Mount where this passage takes place. Rather than Zoom screens and living rooms, Jesus was preaching on a hilltop with hundreds present. So much unlike our service tonight, where we join in worship across our screens, in our homes, in our sanctuaries, perhaps even on the road, or in another state. Jesus tells us not to practice our faith in public so others can see us, but to practice our faith in private so only God can see us. God cares more about the inward posture of the heart than outward displays of showy faith, Jesus says.

Well, this command seems fairly easy to accomplish during the pandemic, doesn't it? We cannot practice our piety in public even if we wanted to do that right now! We cannot worship in our sanctuaries on Sunday mornings, sing our hearts out, or listen to sermons in person that challenge and equip us. We cannot shake hands and hug our fellow parishioners or take communion the same way. The list goes on and on.

*This is the day
we freely say
we are scorched.*

*This is the hour
we are marked
by what has made it
through the burning.*

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How different is this Ash Wednesday from last year. The city had not yet shut down and we had not yet moved our worship services online. A year ago, if someone had told me we would still be worshipping online and almost 500,000 people have died from covid19 in the United States alone, I would not have believed them. Really? In our country? In this century? Our guest room turned into my home office, our living room turned into our sanctuary, our gym, our whatever-we-need-it-to-be room. I have not seen most of the Brown Memorial congregation in person in twelve months.

What do we do with this command to practice our spirituality in private, where no one can see it? Does it matter if no one can see it? Do our virtual family gatherings, our online communion celebrations, do they even matter?

*This is the moment
we ask for the blessing
that lives within
the ancient ashes,
that makes its home
inside the soil of
this sacred earth.*

I have seen people practicing their faith in public and in private all year, but not like before. Instead of leading worship services in person, we are meeting each other for early morning walks to watch the sunrise over the water. Instead of hugging each other during the passing of the peace, we are sharing the peace of Christ in our pajamas while we scoot a little closer to the ones we love on the couch. I have seen my neighbors rally together to redirect money they saved from refinancing their mortgages into a mutual aid relief for unemployed neighbors in Greenmount West in need of support for medicine and food. And I have seen leaders all over this city advocating for just access to testing, vaccinations, digital resources, and housing security during this pandemic. This is the kind of faith, lived out in public and in private, that Jesus celebrates.

*So let us be marked
not for sorrow.
And let us be marked
not for shame.*

*Let us be marked
not for false humility
or for thinking
we are less
than we are*

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Lent is a time for spiritual reflection. Not a time of self contempt. Not a time to heap on the lies of not being enough, of being too much, or being nothing at all. This is not a time to put on holiness and contort your life. Jesus says to shut the door. To get quiet. To listen, in the stillness, to what God is saying to you. Shut the door to the noise of outside demands. Shut the door to the pings of your cell phone, the buzz of more emails to answer, the constant need to be available to everyone all the time. Shut the door to the pressures, within and without, to perform a holy Lent.

*Let us be marked
[but] for claiming
what God can do
within the dust,
within the dirt,
within the stuff
of which the world
is made
and the stars that blaze
in our bones
and the galaxies that spiral
inside the smudge
we bear.¹*

May we practice a holy Lent this year--a Lent based on genuine connection to the true source of Love, Jesus Christ, rooted in public and private faith. Amen.

¹ “Blessing the Dust”, Jan Richardson.