

ASH WEDNESDAY 2023

DAVID WAS THE GREATEST KING ISRAEL EVER HAD. GREAT BECAUSE HE HAD GOD'S TRUTH IN HIS HEART. YET DAVID ALSO KNEW HIMSELF TO BE AN IMPOSTER. ON THE ONE HAND, HE LOVED AND SERVED GOD PASSIONATELY. ON THE OTHER HAND, DARK PASSIONS WERE AT WORK IN HIM TOO. PASSIONS WHICH LED DAVID TO BECOME AN ADULTERER AND A MURDERER.

MAYBE WE AREN'T AS BAD AS DAVID, BUT IN SO MANY WAYS, WE TOO ARE IMPOSTERS. WHAT WE BELIEVE DOESN'T ALWAYS MATCH WHAT WE DO. MARTIN LUTHER SAYS THIS "WE ARE NOT SINNERS BECAUSE WE SIN, WE SIN, BECAUSE WE ARE SINNERS." HAVE YOU EVER KNOWN YOURSELF TO BE AN IMPOSTER?

TODAY MARKS THE BEGINNING OF LENT. IT'S AN OPPORTUNITY TO GO AGAINST THE FLOW OF THE WORLD, TO RESIST THE PULL TO FOLLOW IN ITS WAYS AND BE AND ACT DIFFERENTLY.

BUT KING DAVID DIDN'T – OR WOULDN'T. HE ALLOWED THE FLOW OF HUMAN NATURE TO DICTATE WHAT HAPPENED NEXT. DAVID COVERED UP HIS SINS; MARRIED HIS MISTRESS, HAD HER SOLDIER HUSBAND SENT TO THE FRONT LINES OF BATTLE WHERE HE WOULD BE KILLED. DAVID USED HIS CONSIDERABLE POWER TO CREATE THE APPEARANCE OF PROPRIETY – PAINTING A SYNTHETIC VENEER OF RIGHTEOUSNESS OVER HIS INIQUITIES.

WE ENTER LENT IN THE MIDST OF A WORLD THAT ENCOURAGES US TO RUN FROM RESPONSIBILITY. WE ENTER LENT IN THE MIDST OF A CULTURE THAT ENCOURAGES US TO DENY OUR BROKENNESS, AND ESPECIALLY OUR MORTALITY.

TODAY, WE ARE INVITED TO GO AGAINST THE FLOW OF THE WORLD. SO WE WEAR ASHES. ASHES THAT MARK YOU AND ME AS SINFUL IMPOSTERS BEFORE OUR CREATOR. "ASHES TO ASHES, DUST TO DUST. A REMINDER THAT OUR LIFE ON THIS EARTH IS FLEETING, THAT WE ARE SPIRITUALLY BANKRUPT.

KING DAVID KNOWS THIS ABOUT HIMSELF, BECAUSE HE HAS A CONSCIENCE. IT NAGS AT HIM, ROBBING HIM OF SLEEP AND FOOD. THERE IS A LONGING IN DAVID'S HEART TO DO SOMETHING THAT WILL MAKE HIM RIGHT WITH GOD, NOW THAT HE IS EMPTY AND LOST. THE ANGUISH OF HIS GUILT IS UNBEARABLE IN A TIME WHEN INVADING ARMIES (WHETHER HUMAN OR INSECT) HAVE WIPED OUT THE CROP THAT COULD PROVIDE A FOOD AND DRINK OFFERING FOR THE GOD WITH WHOM HE LONGS TO BE RECONCILED.

DAVID WANTS TO DO SOMETHING TO APPEASE GOD'S ANGER, BUT THERE'S NOTHING HE CAN DO. HE HAS NOTHING LEFT TO OFFER.

AND HE COMES BEFORE THE LORD IN THE ONLY WAY HE CAN – WITH EMPTY HANDS. ALL THIS IS THE PROLOGUE TO PSALM 51, WHICH IS DAVID'S PRAYER. HE BEGS GOD FOR MERCY. ASKS THE LORD TO BLOT OUT HIS OFFENSES AND WASH HIM CLEAN FROM SIN.

TODAY WE ARE INVITED TO PUSH AGAINST THE WAYS OF THIS WORLD – TO REALIZE THAT WE CANNOT SAVE OURSELVES FROM THE DECEIT THAT IS IN OUR HEARTS. TO GO AGAINST THE FLOW MEANS CONFESSING THAT WE CANNOT SAVE OURSELVES FROM THE MESSES WE HAVE MADE AND CONTINUE TO MAKE. WE LONG FOR SAFETY FROM WAR AND TERRORISM, AND SAFETY, TOO, FROM THE INSECURITY OF GROWING OLD. YET WE ARE AFRAID TO HOPE TOO MUCH, KNOWING THAT ALL THE SOLUTIONS DEPEND ON THE INTEGRITY OF IMPOSTERS.

“HAVE MERCY ON ME...” THIS IS DAVID'S PLEA – AND OURS. “CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART, O GOD, AND RENEW A RIGHT SPIRIT WITHIN ME.” THIS MY FRIENDS, IS THE SPIRIT OF LENT. A BROKEN AND CONTRITE HEART, WHICH GOD WILL NOT DESPISE.

SEE, IF THE ASHES ON OUR HEADS SIGNIFY THAT WE ARE IMPOSTERS, THEY ALSO SIGNIFY THAT GOD IS FAITHFUL. CROSS-SHAPED ASHES, REMIND US THAT JESUS HIMSELF BECAME THE SACRIFICE THAT MAKES US WHOLE AGAIN. IN A FEW MOMENTS, WE WILL STRETCH OUT OUR EMPTY HANDS TO RECEIVE THE GRAIN AND DRINK OFFERING GIVEN FOR US BY GOD HIMSELF. IT'S A MYSTERY. BREAD AND WINE. BODY AND BLOOD. BY THIS COMMUNION, WE ARE LINKED TO CHRIST'S DEATH AND RESURRECTION.

THE ONE WHO HAS DELIVERED US FROM DEATH KNOWS THAT WE ARE DUST. AND SO DO WE. BUT THE CROSS INSCRIBED ON OUR HEADS ALSO POINTS TO A GREATER TRUTH. IT IS THE MARK OF OUR BAPTISM, WHERE WE ARE DROWNED OUT OF OUR FIRST LIFE AND REBORN INTO LIFE ABUNDANT.

TODAY WE ARE INVITED TO FIGHT THE TIDE OF THE WORLD. WE WILL LEAVE THIS SPACE TODAY, MARKED NOT ONLY WITH GUILT AND EMPTINESS, MARKED NOT ONLY WITH OUR OWN FUNERALS, BUT WITH THE DEATH THAT BRINGS NEW LIFE. WE WILL GO BACK TO OUR FAMILIES AND JOBS AND SCHOOLS, AS THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST AND RAISED TO NEWNESS OF LIFE. WE WILL GO OUT INTO THE WORLD OF HUMAN

RELATIONSHIPS, TRUSTING THAT GOD CAN AND HAS AND WILL CREATE A NEW AND RIGHT SPIRIT WITHIN US.

WE CAN GO FORTH FROM THIS PLACE TO PRACTICE RIGHTEOUSNESS (AS JESUS SAID) – NOT TO IMPRESS OTHERS OR TO COVER UP WHAT IS UGLEY, BUT AS A RESPONSE TO ALL THAT GOD HAS DONE. IN THE SPIRIT OF REPENTANCE, WE CAN TAKE UP THE DISCIPLINES OF LENT TO WHICH JESUS CALLS US.

JESUS TOOK FOR GRANTED THAT HIS DISCIPLES WOULD PRAY AND FAST, AND GIVE ALMS. HIS ONLY CONCERN WAS THAT THEY WOULD DO THESE ACTS OF PIETY IN THE RIGHT SPIRIT. NOT TO IMPRESS OTHERS, BUT TO DEEPEN THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LORD. MANY PEOPLE TODAY FIND THESE TRADITIONAL DISCIPLINES OF LENT INCOMPREHENSIBLE.

ASK PEOPLE HOW THEY'RE DOING THESE DAYS, AND SO OFTEN THE ANSWER INCLUDES THE WORD "BUSY". THERE'S A STRAIN IN HOW PEOPLE SAY THE WORD, AS THOUGH THEY WANT YOU TO TELL THEM THEY HAVE PERMISSION TO SLOW DOWN. THEY WANT TO BE ABSOLVED OF THEIR BUSYNESS BY SOMETHING LESS THAN CARDIAC ARREST. THEN DOWN THE ROAD JESUS COMES TALKING ABOUT PRAYER. IF YOU REALLY WANT TO LIVE THE NEW LIFE – THEN PRAY. GIVE UP RUSHING FROM ONE THING TO THE NEXT AND LEAVE SOME EMPTY SPACE FOR GOD.

IN MY FIRST CALL IN DAYTON, THE CHURCH SAT ACROSS FROM A SUBDIVISION OF MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR HOMES – ALL OF THEM GATED AND BEHIND BARS. IT MADE ME WONDER IF THE PEOPLE INSIDE WERE IMPRISONED BY WHAT THEY HAD. AND EVEN WE WHO LIVE IN MODEST HOMES NEED TO ASK OURSELVES "DO WE HAVE STUFF, OR DOES OUR STUFF HAVE US?" THEN DOWN THE ROAD JESUS COMES TALKING ABOUT FASTING. IF YOU REALLY WANT TO LIVE THE NEW LIFE – THEN FAST. DON'T MERELY EXIST AS A CONSUMER. UN-CLUTTER THAT WHICH CLUTTERS UP YOUR LIFE.

AS WE BEGIN LENT, WE ARE INVITED TO STAND AGAINST ALL THAT THE WORLD WOULD TELL US WE NEED IN ORDER TO BE WHOLE.

AUTHOR RICHARD HART IN HIS BOOK "EDGING OUT GOD" TELLS THE STORY OF A RUSSIAN WOMAN WHOSE SON WAS COURT-MARTIALED AND EXECUTED SHORTLY BEFORE THE START OF WWII. THE GRIEVING MOTHER SEARCHED OUT THE SOLDIER WHO HAD FIRED THE SHOT

THAT KILLED HER SON, ONLY TO FIND HIM CRITICALLY ILL AND NEAR DEATH. SHE NURSED HIM BACK TO LIFE AND THEN ADOPTED HIM.

SO OFTEN WE EXPERIENCE THE WORLD AS FULL OF STRANGERS. WE DON'T LOOK FOR THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THEM AND US. OUR COMMON HUMANITY GOES UNRECOGNIZED. THEIR PROBLEMS HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH OUR PROBLEMS, OR SO WE SAY. THEN DOWN THE ROAD COMES JESUS TALKING ABOUT ALMSGIVING. IF YOU REALLY WANT TO LIVE A NEW LIFE – THEN GIVE ALMS. NOT JUST YOUR SPARE CHANGE, BUT THE LOVE IN YOUR HEART. ALWAYS BE ON THE LOOK OUT FOR THE CONNECTION BETWEEN YOU AND OTHERS. TREAT NO ONE AS A STRANGER.

DON'T LEAVE THE MESSAGE OF LENT HERE IN THE SANCTUARY – IT'S A HUNGRY WORLD OUT THERE, WAITING FOR THE WORD TO BECOME FLESH AND THE BREAD AND WINE TO BECOME FOOD THAT NOURISHES THE HUNGRY SOUL.

LIVE YOUR LIFE AS A TRANSLATION THAT IS UNMISTAKEABLE. SLOW DOWN. UN-CLUTTER. TREAT NO ONE AS A STRANGER.

TODAY WE ARE INVITED TO GO AGAINST THE FLOW. IN THE SPIRIT OF REPENTANCE, WE COME AS EMPTY -HANDED IMPOSTERS TO THE TABLE OF GRACE, WITH NOTHING TO OFFER FOR OUR SINS. BUT WE LEAVE THAT VERY SAME TABLE DELIVERED, RENEWED, AND EQUIPPED – HAVING EVERYTHING TO OFFER THE WORLD. SUCH IS THE PARADOX OF OUR FAITH. IN THE NAME OF THE ONE WHO, THOUGH WE ARE DUST, INVITES US TO SHINE WITH ETERNAL LIGHT. AMEN.