

**BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI**  
**THE WORSHIP OF GOD • FEBRUARY 26, 2020 • LENT**  
**ASH WEDNESDAY**

**Prayer of Confession**

Creative, passionate God, you delight to shape the world in beauty and harmony. You invite us to participate in the balance of creation. We grow in wisdom as our experience unfolds; we take good learning out of difficult situations yet also find our well-meant endeavors leading to unintended consequences. Too often we give in to temptation that disrupts the joyous, chaotic order of the universe. We cannot undo all our mistakes, but we can turn once more to the living presence of Jesus and find new ways to live and love each other and the earth. Do not let our hearts be fearful, but let us in silence acknowledge our sin and seek the forgiveness that restores your peace.

**The Scripture**  
**Isaiah 43:1-9**

*But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."*

*Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears! Let all the nations gather together, and let the peoples assemble. Who among them declared this, and foretold to us the former things? Let them bring their witnesses to justify them, and let them hear and say, "It is true."*

**The Message**  
***It Is True***  
**Mark Briley**

*You are going to die. Did you know this? And you're not alone. I'm going to die, too. It is true.*

They're even teaching this in schools. My daughter came home from school one day last year and announced, "*It's official – my classmates and I are going to live to be 127.*" That's a crazy long life, but it's still worthy to note that 128<sup>th</sup> year is not expected to follow. We're going to die.

I don't say this to be shocking or morbid. I'm just stating what we all know to be true even though we avoid talking about death as often as possible.

But tonight? Ash Wednesday. "*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*" Death is our reminder tonight as we launch this very important season, we call Lent. In the spirit of the upcoming Olympics, consider tonight the Opening Ceremony of the season. But it's sort of a strange way to start, right? Lent *starts* with death and *ends* with life. Seems a little backwards. But it's important. It was as if to say, "*Don't skip the journey of climbing the mountain from death's valley – if you jump from mountain top to mountain top, you'll never appreciate the gift of the view from the top and what it cost you to get there.*" It's hard to appreciate Easter's gift without first recognizing the painful realities of death. It puts things in perspective.

If you need some help with this perspective, well, there's an app for that of course. Hansa Bergwall, a 37-year-old publicist from Brooklyn and Ian Thomas, a 29-year-old freelance app developer, created the app called... wait for it... *WeCroak*.<sup>1</sup> A good friend turned me onto this most recently. *WeCroak* was born of Bhutanese folklore saying that to be happy, one ought to contemplate death five times a day. Created a couple of years ago, the *WeCroak* app has more than 30,000 users – most of whom are in their 20's and 30's. Death once a totally taboo subject is now trending. How does it work?



Totally simple. Five random times a day, you get a "*ping!*" on your phone with a statement that says, "*Don't forget, you're going to die.*" That's it. Five times a day. It does give you one option – and that is to click on the reminder which offers a quote to ponder further like, "*The grave has no sunny corners*" or the more motivating, "*Begin again the story of your life.*" "*Don't forget, you are going to die.*" The message is provocative in its bluntness and may make us a tad uncomfortable. We've generally tried to downplay death at every turn.

Tracy Morgan, a New York psychoanalyst (not the comedian) says that we are attached to the notion that we are our own entrepreneurs, running our bodies like corporations. Here's her word: "*[Our] idea is to give death the slip. Things may be spinning out of control but it's 'I'm eating well, I'm exercising, I'm so darned virtuous, I can do things to my face, I can [continuously fix my body]. I'll survive.'*" She adds, "*If you're the master of death, you're the ultimate entrepreneur.*"

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wecroak.com/>

One 50-year-old woman finds the daily alerts liberating: *“I can wash dishes with a smile,”* she said. *“I can talk on the phone,”* and number of mundane things *“knowing all the while that this life is not a dress rehearsal. It helps me enjoy the moment.”* Another 27-year-old artist, who got push back from his friends saying, *“Why would you want to be reminded of death?”* said, *“With so many stimuli coming at you, it’s nice to have something in your pocket that slows you down, lets you look at the big picture. Besides, what could be more alluring than to break a taboo.”*<sup>2</sup> Don’t forget, you’re going to die. It is true.

There’s nothing flippant about such a statement – at least not in my intent for this evening. I’ve buried too many friends over the years. I’ve held too many hands at the moment of death to pretend that death could be trivialized. On the contrary, death and all its grief and pain is nothing to scoff at. Instead, we face it, we claim it, we honor it, and in turn, we free it from our fears. The season of Lent says, *“Start by looking death in the eyes and find your way to the freedom of Easter which removes death’s power.”*

Lent asks us to pay close attention, to do the hard work of examining the soul so that we come to the end of the season having put in the hard work. Are you up for it? I don’t think you’d be here tonight if you weren’t. And... if I know you at all, we’re a people who are called to go deep, to not shy away from death but to confront it with the light of our faith.

The prophet Isaiah is a large presence in the lives of people who live by faith in God, who offer themselves to the mold-ability of the word and Spirit of God. Isaiah is an artistic prophet – he takes the stuff of our ordinary and often disappointing human experience and shows us how it is the very stuff that God uses to create and save and give hope. Nothing is unusable by God. God’s work within us includes the remaking of the mess we often find ourselves lost within.

That idea describes a common word most typically used on this night: repent. Turn things around. Do a 180. Stop. Listen. Pay attention. Respond. Tonight, is about nothing short of remembering our mortality – we will die. In light of such a reality, the greater question is, *“How are you gonna live?”*

Isaiah offers a famed word later in the passage that Ed read for us this evening. The beloved 43<sup>rd</sup> chapter. Good stuff in that chapter: *“I’m about to do a new thing! Do you not perceive it?”* I love that. But the opening lines? They are the ones I want you to home in on tonight. *“But now says the Lord, God who created you, God who formed you: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/10/style/death-app-we-croak.html>

This was not easily squeezed onto a candy heart, so the Valentines people condensed it to say, "*Be mine.*" Isaiah preaches these words following this discourse about death and sin and Israel's disobedience. He needed them to own their shortcomings, their flaws and sins and death-dealing ways but... but... then to know: "*God who created you, God who formed you – Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine.*"

Coming out of seminary, Danielle Shroyer landed her first job as an assistant chaplain for a retirement community. She was young, inexperienced, and overwhelmed by the enormity of being charged with saying something holy in the face of life's most critical moments. Her friend and fellow chaplain gave her a Bible highlighting and earmarking one simple text. Isaiah 43:1 as if to say, "*This. Read this.*" (*And maybe otherwise just keep your mouth shut*). And she put it to work. When a resident felt lost and unaware of who or where he was, she read it. When a husband lost his wife of sixty years, she read it. To a daughter who just lost her beloved mother, she read it. In the hospital, in the infirmary, by the bedsides, in Wednesday chapel, and even once on a bench with a man who believed he was waiting for a train to Paris, she read Isaiah 43:1. What could be more important for them to know? "*But now thus says the Lord, God who created you, God who formed you; Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*" God who created you, Ms. Cobbs. God who formed you, Mr. Croft. God has called you by name. And you belong to God. You are mine. You belong. All of scripture holds this story of God sticking with it, sticking with us. Hey, sin? Yes. "*I'm still claiming you.*" Rejection? "*Never from me. I'm sticking.*" What about death? "*Even then. I've marked you for life.*"<sup>3</sup>

In the verses that follow, Isaiah, as God's mouthpiece, is looking for people who can see this, who can hear it, who can receive it, who can testify that indeed, "*It is true.*" What about you? Can you see it? Can you hear it? The word that God has claimed you? Marked you for life even in the face of death? I know it's hard to see and hear. The news bombards us with other messages than that.

The poet Mary Oliver said it well, "*Wherever I am, the world comes after me. It offers me its busyness. It does not believe that I do not want it.*" The world comes after you. In your face. On our phones. Americans check their phones, on average, 76 times a day spending a cumulative two-and-a-half hours. Amid growing concerns over our phone fixation, Silicon Valley has, in typical fashion, proposed technology as the solution; there are now more than 1,000 mindfulness apps designed to help us disconnect.<sup>4</sup>

*WeCroak* intentionally didn't build out their app to consume time. Users spend, on average, just 36 seconds a day reading five texts that say, "*Don't forget, you're going*

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<sup>3</sup> Paragraph inspired by Danielle Shroyer's work in "Original Blessing." Fortress Press. Minneapolis. Pg. 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/01/when-death-pings/546587/>

to die.” Even still – is your life just crammed full of stuff and messages and frustrations and material concerns that just dominate your very being? Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, a reminder of death but also a reminder that stuff is stuff and not anything worth claiming as essential. Mary Oliver expounded in her poem called, “Storage.” See if you can relate:

*When I moved from one house to another, there were many things I had no room for. What does one do? I rented a storage space. And filled it. Years passed. Occasionally I went there and looked in, but nothing happened, not a single twinge of the heart. As I grew older, the things I cared about grew fewer, but were more important. So, one day, I undid the lock and called the trash man. He took everything. I felt like the little donkey when his burden is finally lifted. Things! Burn them, burn them! Make a beautiful fire! More room in your heart for love, for the trees! For the birds who own nothing -- the reason they can fly.<sup>5</sup>*

Isaiah is looking for someone to testify. To claim, “God who created you, God who formed you – Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine.” And yet... we can’t testify or our testimonies are muffled by our piles and stacks of stuff – of material possessions, yes – but also our stacks of gossip, of envy, of fear, of the busyness the world has offered us. Yet tonight, this reality of our pending death, says, “That stuff has no place in the soul. Make way. Clear the mechanism.” It’s the PT Barnum line from the Greatest Showman’s song, *From Now On* – “Let’s wait until tomorrow, starts tonight.” Just as Isaiah had need, we have such need for someone to stand up in today’s climate and say, “It is true – God’s love. God’s claim on us. God’s value of each and every one.” Is your life making that testimony? I know. It’s not the easiest thing. And such a testimony won’t pay the bills – at least not in this world. And... death... well, it may seem too close to home these days to worry about much else. Fear may be paying the rent of your soul.

I was in the desert of Arizona – just outside of Tucson a few weeks ago. Absolutely beautiful this time of year. Highs in the 70’s. Lows in the 50’s. And out in the desert wash at night – nothing but you, the coyotes, and front row seat to the heavens. You can reach up and pry the stars right off Orion’s belt. It’s magnificent. It was a deeply meaningful week but... as all things must, the week came to an end and a couple of us from our group hopped in the rental mini-van and were making the way back to the Phoenix airport. There’s not a whole lot on that 120-mile stretch of road. Just desert and then a little more desert. There is “*The Boneyard*” somewhere along the way – the world’s largest aircraft graveyard. Some 4,400 abandoned aircraft that may be scrounged over for parts in the years to come. The desert climate apparently preserves the equipment fairly well.

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<sup>5</sup> Inspired from part of this poem which was shared in “*Mary Oliver and the Poetry of Lent: A Lenten Devotional*” put out by the people of the Salt Project. <http://www.saltproject.org/>

There are some cotton fields, too, and a strange orchard of Pecan trees who seemed to be begging anyone who would pass by, "*Please get me out of the desert.*" Not a whole lotta life, you know? So, here are a handful of ministers ranging from their late 30's to late 60's in a mini-van in the middle of the desert. "*What a wild crew!*" Certainly, had the makings of a funny car scene in some makeshift movie.

But as the wisdom always does, it spilled out... even in that mini-van as we looked at the death of jet planes and pecan trees and cotton bushes and wondered about death itself. One of the eldest wise one's among us offers quite humbly, quietly, eloquently a quote by Yehuda HaLevi: "*'Tis a fearful thing to love what death can touch.*"

It is true. And what do we know about death? It touches everything, which means, it is hard to love, and it is hard to be loved but love is the only calling to which Jesus aspires for you, for me. The prophet Isaiah, knowing the ways of death are prevalent, offers this word tonight for us to hold on to. *God who created you, James. God who formed you, Whitney. Do not fear, George. I have redeemed you, Bill. I have called you by name, Carolyn. You are mine, Janet. [insert your own name in that cosmic assurance].*

*WeCroak* says, "*Don't forget, you are going to die.*" Tonight, when we mark one another's forehead with the mark of the cross, we do so in that very recognition. But... we do so only to launch us in this season that makes its way to life. It's a moment to say, "*I will not shortchange these forty days.*" "*I will dig in.*" "*I will make a change.*" "*I will offer myself.*" And remember where we're headed – we've moving toward life. Jesus said, "*I have come that you may have life, and life more abundantly.*" To *this* I will testify. It is true. It is true.