

Three Chopt Presbyterian Church
Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2010
Dr. Brenda Halbrooks, preaching
Isaiah 58:1-12 and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 (see scripture text below)

Many of you know that 11 of us departed Haiti 48 hours before the earthquake on January 12, an event that could be the most destructive disaster in modern history.

Link to 2-16-10 article "Haiti quake far more destructive than 2004 tsunami: study:
http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20100216/ts_afp/haitiquake

As we see the magnitude of the destruction we are reminded of how vulnerable we are as human beings, how fleeting this life on earth can be, and how we never know when the day will come when we take our last breath. We are reminded of our mortality.

We know this, all of us, except perhaps the youngest among us; we know what it is to face mortality. We may have walked with a loved one in the receiving of a terminal diagnosis; we have experienced the loss of one we love and the grief and mourning that follow that loss. We may have faced our own mortality with a near miss; a serious illness; a critical accident; a moment of truth which shook us to the core. We know what it is to face our mortality, yet we most often turn away from this fact.

We had with us at the Ash Wednesday service the blessing of the presence of Danny Iverson, the leader of a ministry in inner city Newark, where we have sent members on a week long mission trip for the past 3 summers. Danny and his ministry community have faced mortality, for they live in the midst of gang violence and drug use and have mourned the loss of many a young life. He knows what it is to face mortality.

Link to the ministry: <http://www.newarksafehaven.com/index.php>

Ash Wednesday is a day when we reflect on our mortality, turn to God in penitence, and remember that it is by God's gracious gift that we are given everlasting life in our savior Jesus Christ. This evening we are invited to come forward for the imposition of ashes as a sign of our mortality and a symbol of our repentance.

Ashes have always been a sign of repentance in the scriptures. Jonah called for the Ninevites to turn to God – and when they did, they repented by covering themselves with sackcloth and sitting in ashes. (Jonah 3:1-6). Job repents before God in sackcloth and ashes (Job 16:15). Jeremiah calls for the people to put on sackcloth and "roll in ashes" (Jeremiah 6:26). Jesus reproached the cities that did not repent "in sackcloth and ashes." (Matthew 11:20).

As we receive the ashes we recall God's word to Adam "you are dust, and to dust you shall return." (Genesis 3:19) Ashes are burned and spent. Ashes are black and grey, charred and useless. Ashes remind us that all things are temporary in this world,

including us. It is said that next to taxes the only other certainty in life is death. One day we will become dust, our lives spent.

How would we live life if we knew our days were numbered? What would we do differently if we knew we were going to die?

This question can transform us. This is the call of Ash Wednesday. This is God's call to us. How does the scripture teach us to live until we die?

Friends, three things as we journey into Lent on this Ash Wednesday:

- (1) God desires our open, vulnerable heartfelt worship.
- (2) God sends us to give our hearts to those who are vulnerable.
- (3) God assures us that the true home for our heart is in heaven.

1. The Isaiah passage calls for true worship, which is not a demonstration of piety for others, or a pretense of being good, but an open, vulnerable, humble coming before God aware of our brokenness. God desires that we take away our masks and illusions and come as those who are completely known by God and held by God's grace.

2. True worship is not only heartfelt and vulnerable, it is demonstrated in acts of caring for others who are vulnerable and without the basic needs of life. True worship is given to God not by staying in the place of worship but by going out into the world to care for God's children in need. God desires that we give our hearts to those who are vulnerable. God desires that we "spend ourselves," just as the ashes are "spent" in the service of God's children. The ministry in Newark has taken up this metaphor and used it to unite people in understanding what it is to live for Christ in every aspect of life:

Link to the ministry "Spend Yourself" <http://www.spendyourself.org/main/home.html>

The Isaiah passage, gives the call of God through the voice of the prophet, saying: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house?" I am reminded of the people of Haiti, each family given a plastic tarp under which to live for the foreseeable future, even with the monsoon season approaching.

Link to article "Haiti's Homeless Get Tarps, Want Tents"
http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/35384820/ns/world_news-haiti_earthquake/

Finally, as the Matthew passage reveals in the words of Jesus: "do not store up treasure on earth, but rather store up treasures in heaven, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." This heart that we feel constantly beating will one day stop; but our real heart will beat on in our true home through the grace and mercy of God.

As our Ash Wednesday service we moved from the sermon into a hymn entitled "In Haiti There is Anguish" – a hymn written just after the earthquake, reminding us of God's presence even in the midst of tragedy; a hymn that moves from that specific event to a

broader call to find God's presence and to respond with God's grace wherever in the world there is suffering.

Amen.

Isaiah 58:1-12

False and True Worship

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that practised righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;

they ask of me righteous judgements,
they delight to draw near to God.

'Why do we fast, but you do not see?

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?'

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,
and oppress all your workers.

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rearguard.
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Concerning Almsgiving

‘Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they

may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Concerning Prayer

‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Concerning Fasting

‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Concerning Treasures

‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

In Haiti, There is Anguish

ST. CHRISTOPHER 7.6.8.6.8.6.8.6

(" [Beneath the Cross of Jesus](#)")

In Haiti, there is anguish that seems too much to bear;
A land so used to sorrow now knows even more despair.
From city streets, the cries of grief rise up to hills above;
In all the sorrow, pain and death, where are you, God of love?

A woman sifts through rubble, a man has lost his home,
A hungry, orphaned toddler sobs, for she is now alone.
Where are you, Lord,
 when thousands die-the rich, the poorest poor?
Were you the very first to cry for all that is no more?

O God, you love your children; you hear each lifted prayer!
May all who suffer in that land know you are present there.
In moments of compassion shown, in simple acts of grace,
May those in pain find healing balm,
 and know your love's embrace.

Where are you in the anguish? Lord, may we hear anew
That anywhere your world cries out,
 you're there-- and suffering, too.
And may we see, in others' pain,
 the cross we're called to bear;
Send out your church in Jesus' name to pray,
 to serve, to share.

Tune: Frederick Charles Maker, 1881

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Carolyn Winfrey Gillette has written over 150 other hymns, including two books of hymns; for a complete list of her hymns go to www.carolynshymns.com/