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**Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ**

Hands of Lent

*A Sermon by*

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Scripture: Isaiah 58 9:12

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🎵 God is still speaking,

Many years ago I was attending Fuller Seminary at the main campus. Every Wednesday morning there was a chapel service on campus, and I made it a point to be in attendance. One particular Wednesday morning in February, I found myself in a worship service unlike any other I had attended. About halfway through the service, the congregation of students began to process toward the front of the sanctuary. When I reached the minister, he anointed my forehead with ashes and said to me, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

As I made my way back toward my seat, I remember thinking to myself, “I have been missing out on this my whole life.” Today I consider that particular moment my first authentic religious experience. You see, in that moment, I was not concerned about my life conforming to a divine will. In that moment, I was faced with my own mortality, comforted with the knowledge that God is with me.

Ash Wednesday has been an important part of the Christian tradition throughout the history of the church. On this first day of Lent, people came to their house of worship, were reminded of the forty days of this season (an echo of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness), and encouraged to use this time for thoughtful reflection. The priest would gather up the palms left over from the Easter celebrations of the previous year, burn them, and use their ashes on this day. He would anoint the heads of each worshiper with the ashes and say, “Remember, oh man, that you are dust, and to dust you will return.”

Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent, a season of reflection on our humanity and our reliance on God. It is the moment when we are reminded of our human limitations and shortcomings and our need to trust in God’s presence in our lives.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

This is not just religious myth. Physicists are now telling us that there is a “high mathematical probability” that some of the molecules in us this very moment have come or will someday go to the farthest reaches of the cosmos. “A breath of air. A cell on your eyelid, in a drop of sweat, or in the wall of your heart has in all likelihood been to the edge of space.”

In other words, we are made of the ashes of dead stars. What is more, our ashes extend in time as well as space. There is an equally high mathematical probability that some of our molecular stuff has come from the primeval fireball of creation itself, the furnace in which the universe began. That we might literally have, for a while at least, within our very bodies some of the matter that was there during the very first moment, or some of the air which Moses breathed when he told Pharaoh, ‘Let my people go!’ or some of the air which formed the wind which propelled Paul’s ship during his missionary journeys.

We are created from dust, and to dust we shall return.

But this is no morbid thought. Ash Wednesday is a time to ponder the miracle and the preciousness of the gift of life; to insist once more that we are stewards of God’s blessings, and to find a little space within which to reflect upon this fact and its meaning.

For the Israelites in our Scripture reading, the religious act of fasting has evolved into a source of conflict and division among the people. In the text we can conclude that for the people,

apathy and discouragement have begun to replace hope and faith. They were simply going through the motions. Apathy and discouragement ultimately lead to cynicism and nihilism, the opposite of faith. As the people of God continue to fast, the future remains uncertain. Without hope, the fast has become routine, meaningless, hopeless.

Our modern church is in the process of being exiled; increasingly our churches are seen as irrelevant, backward, and unnecessary. What does the future hold? Will God intervene and save us from exile?

For many in the mainline churches, we must face not only our own mortality, but that of our churches as well. These buildings too are created from dust, and shall return to dust. Our sanctuaries and fellowship halls, our stained glass and pulpits will one day be reduced to rubble. The question for us today is not, “What will we have to show for this?” but rather, “How do we live now, in light of this knowledge?”

The prophet Isaiah is talking about religious people who seem to be doing all the right things—they fast and they observe the Sabbath. Isaiah is reminding us that God is calling for a new kind of fast, one that goes beyond sackcloth and ashes. We are called, in our limited contexts, to be stewards for God’s blessings.

God is calling for a new kind of fast: “To loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free...to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house.

This season offers us a time to reorient ourselves toward the call of God on our lives. Our religious practices are not meant to serve our own needs, but to point others toward the love of God.

William Barclay tells of an old man near his death who was obviously troubled. When asked what was disturbing him, he replied, “One day when I was young I was playing with some other boys at a crossroads. We reversed a sign post so that its arms were pointing in the wrong direction, and I’ve never ceased to wonder how many people were sent in the wrong direction by what we did.”

How many people have been turned off to the Christian tradition because of the misuse and abuse of our religion? The in-fighting and bitter conflicts which seems so prevalent in the mainline churches today?

The new fasting we are called to goes beyond personal sacrifices done for piety, and calls for the people of God to break the bonds of injustice in the world. You see, the old paradigm involves somebody doing something for somebody else. “Charity.” God is not calling us to charity, God is calling us to be a part of the transforming and healing work of Christ in our world. When we participate in this work, we too are healed and transformed. Now, this paradigm shift doesn’t happen on a large scale all at once. It happens when our faith communities begin to take this call of God seriously.

This time of Lent is one in which our reflection on our own mortality is supplemented by our hope in the Easter event. It is exactly this hope that motivates us to participate in this

transforming work of God in our world. This hope is sparked by our reflection upon the gift of God's life in us, and the love of God in Christ. This hope is nourished by personal religious experience, and strengthened within our communities of faith.

Lent is so often identified as a time of sacrifice, of "letting go." These sacrifices are helpful because they allow us to focus more intently on God by "letting go" of the things which crowd our lives. What will you be letting go of this Lent season?

The prophets of our day are the ones railing against the spirit of materialism which has saturated our culture and seeps into our religious lives. Have our attempts to sell the gospel as a product to a consumerist society replaced the kingdom-bringing spirit of Christ in our churches? This is why we need to fast, to "let go" of those things which so often have a hold on us.

In a culture where everything is commodified, "letting go" *is* counter-cultural. But prophetic religion calls us to more than just "letting go." Now that we have let go of those things, what will we use our hands for? Will we use our hands to build up, to create, to provide shelter? Will we use our hands to tear down? To break the bonds of injustice, to tear apart those walls we have built which separate us from one another? Will we use our hands to clean, to wipe away, to extend help, to draw others in?

Lent begins by reminding us of our own mortality as we follow the footsteps of Jesus to Jerusalem and finally to Golgotha. Life is a journey and a journey has an end. We do not travel forever. One day we come to the end of the road. Ash Wednesday reminds us of this, and therefore to travel well and wisely, to make God our ever constant and loving companion on this trip, and to look after one another as well.

Praise be to God, Amen.