

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Ash Wednesday 2021, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

COVID-19 was barely on my radar screen last Ash Wednesday. Last year, Ash Wednesday was my first service back after the first of what turned out to be several cancer surgeries, although I didn't know that at the time. Last year, I took on contemplating my own death for Lent. After all, on Ash Wednesday, we remember that we were made from dust and will return to dust. Contemplating death was appropriate.

Then the pandemic took over, shutting churches down and making our mortality more visible than Lent ever could. My friend Sean, interim rector at a nearby church, suffered a fatal heart attack while out running, and I was diagnosed with lung cancer on top of the breast cancer for which I was being treated. Then I decided, forget my Lenten discipline. I'm done contemplating death. I can't Lent anymore this year.

Yet now it's Lent again, and we still have so many restrictions in our daily lives. I feel like last year's Lent never really ended. So how do we observe Lent again? This Ash Wednesday, our world is smaller and feels more dangerous. Here at St. David's, we are observing one Ash Wednesday livestreamed in the evening rather than our usual three in-person services. Some of you picked up ashes this week that were created from burning palm fronds and blessed in previous years, and some of you are watching this without ashes. That's fine. In a few moments I am going to go over how we can impose ashes on ourselves or the people in our household. You can use dirt, you can use fireplace ashes, you can use clean kitty litter, you can break up the tip of a pencil: or, you can skip the ashes.

While Ash Wednesday has been one of the most significant days of the year in my life personally, Lent is not only about Ash Wednesday and ashes. In Lent, we emphasize three things as found in tonight's Gospel reading: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Most of us have been already been fasting from things we love for almost a whole year already. We've given up restaurants and gyms and vacations and theatre and the Flying Squirrels and, most bizarrely, we have given up worshipping in our church building together. Singing together. Breaking bread together.

If you are fasting from something this Lent, I'd love to hear about it; but if you aren't, I understand. I also understand that as far as almsgiving goes, most of us have reduced incomes. Many of us are working reduced hours, including St. David's staff members. Many businesses are suffering. We have less money for alms.

This Lent, I am going to focus more on prayer than fasting or almsgiving, and I invite those of you who are struggling with fasting and almsgiving during an extended pandemic to join me.

Prayer isn't about impressing other people by going around with ashes on our forehead, displaying our piety. Prayer is about connecting with God. Same with these ashes: they are a way to connect with God, not a pious fashion statement.

In Lent, we want to reorient ourselves toward God in preparation for the glorious resurrection, the central event of our Christian faith. We talk about repenting, changing direction, so that we are aligned with God's goals for us. How can we pray more effectively in Lent?

Sometimes some of us approach prayer as something we *should* do, not something we want to do. And prayer is sometimes hard. Sometimes, it feels like God is absent. Sometimes, our prayers are laments, like the opening of psalm 13: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" I find my feelings expressed in the psalms: sometimes praise and ecstasy, and sometimes, agony and lament.

But sometimes, the psalms and the prayer book just don't express the prayers of my heart. That's not a popular or smart thing for an Episcopal priest to say. But sometimes, I need to turn the things I love to do into prayer instead of praying the words of the prayer book or of an ancient psalmist.

Many pray by singing or playing music. We can't do that in person as a congregation right now, but in Lent, if that's how you pray, do it at home. I didn't understand music as prayer until I started with my ukulele, and believe me, I know how ridiculous that sounds; but I mean it. One morning this past pandemic during Advent, when I was upset about church being closed to in-person worship again, I played Advent music on my ukulele and sang by myself. (It helped that Gary wasn't home and no one but Pepper could hear me.) It was a prayer. I'm not as fond of Lenten music as I am of Advent music, so that's probably not how I'm going to pray during Lent, but I hope you will if it feeds your soul and connects you to God.

I love reading, as you all know. I love books. Many years I give up buying books for Lent because I tend to hoard them and buy more than I can ever possibly read. But this year, I am taking on a particular devotional for Lent, *Holy Solitude* by Heidi Haverkamp. I'm reading it slowly and pondering the excellent questions the writer raises and I am writing about it weekly, and some of you are on that journey with me. For me, that's prayer. Prayer with a community.

Many of us find God in nature, and that can be a stupendous way to pray: slowly walking, drinking in the beauty. I am scared of the ice that is apparently coming our way again tonight. I know many of us lost power last weekend, and it sounds like we might again. I can't stand that.

But. I was struck by the beauty of forsythia about to bud but encased in ice. Ice dripping off birdhouses and birdbaths. I connect to God in nature, even when nature scares me, with trees and branches laden with ice and sometimes falling over. A wicked winter wonderland.

Walking is prayer for me. Walking the labyrinth. Walking in my neighborhood. Soon we may run or walk a 5K in a socially distanced way as a church activity. That can be prayer. That can draw us closer to God, if we approach it with that intention.

What do you love to do, and how can you turn that into a prayer to prepare you for the miracle of the resurrection?