

March 22, 2015

Lenten Evening Prayer

Isaiah 53:1-5

1 Who can believe what we have heard, and for whose sake has the LORD's arm been revealed? 2 He grew up like a young plant before us, like a root from dry ground. He possessed no splendid form for us to see, no desirable appearance. 3 He was despised and avoided by others; a man who suffered, who knew sickness well. Like someone from whom people hid their faces, he was despised, and we didn't think about him. 4 It was certainly our sickness that he carried, and our sufferings that he bore, but we thought him afflicted, struck down by God and tormented. 5 He was pierced because of our rebellions and crushed because of our crimes. He bore the punishment that made us whole; by his wounds we are healed.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

The Lenten season begins with ashes. We gathered in darkness a few Wednesdays ago, with dust and oil smeared on our foreheads, embracing this liturgical dirt as the birthmark of our race. We are dust, the dust that God formed in Eden, the dust that God scooped up, and breathed, breathed, breathed divine life into this dust. Without God, we are nothing but dust, and will return to dust. This season begins with ashes.

Over Thanksgiving, we visited my brother's family in Manitou Springs. They live but a few miles from

where forest fires raged last year. One afternoon we drove throughout the mountains, crossing over burn scars from lush forest to ashen trunks. The vast power of such a disaster, even many months after its passing, is humbling. The entire landscape was changed because of the fire, with one side still a full-fledged forest, and the other charred wood, with no underbrush, and almost no green at all. Almost.

You see, as we drove along these mountain trails, we noticed green on both sides of the burn scar. Of course, on the side untouched by fire, the pines and spruces carried their needles proudly, and evergreen foliage carpeted the ground. On the other side, the victim of the fire, we saw at first only death and construction. Until we looked closer. Tiny sprouts of

green sprang up through the dirt and ashes. Though too late in the season to last for long, these plants arose as if in defiance of destruction. They would have life. No matter the landscape, resurrection was coming. Despite the ashes around, lilies began to grow.

The image on the screen comes from similar forest fires in Oregon, where these lacey blooms sprouted up soon after a burn. Ashes and lilies coinciding. Death and resurrection colliding. What's this all about?

The voice of Mr. Duxbury, my high school environmental geology teacher, rings in my head. Though many of the forest fires we experience today are the fault of human negligence, forest fires are a

naturally recurring phenomenon, with or without human intervention. They are, simply, *natural* disasters. You see, for certain ecosystems to thrive, fires are required in order to produce new life. For instance, one tree known as the Lodgepole Pine, common in the Western US and Canada, requires the heat of a fire to melt away the resin that protects the seed. Without the flames, the seed will never germinate. Fires also help to clear overgrowth that chokes out life on the ground and, here's the kicker, provide fertilizer for new growth in the forest. And that fertilizer is ashes. The ashes contain the nutrients of the burned organisms, for their vitamins and minerals will feed new plants. Along with water, sun, and new seeds, these ashes provide an incredibly rich

environment for new growth. The death of the old forest provides the life of the new. The old passes away to fertilize the new. The ashes lead to the lilies.

Perhaps we too know what it is like to find new life out of death. Isaiah's words remind us that our healing comes out of the ashes of Christ's suffering. "He was pierced because of our rebellions and crushed because of our crimes. He bore the punishment that made us whole; by his wounds we are healed." And oh, how we need healing. Physical ailments and emotional ones, relational brokenness and mental distress, financial troubles and occupational hazards, and we want healing from it all. We want the lilies of joy and deliverance. Often what we don't want is the pain, the burn, the ashes.

But like that lodgepole pine, sometimes our new life must be born of fire and for us especially, the Holy Spirit. Like an overgrown forest, sometimes we need to experience the death of the old life to fertilize the new one. There is hope for healing, but that does not mean we can avoid the ashes. Whatever deliverance looks like, it requires a journey through the ashes, both our own, and God's.

As we seek healing in the midst of our pain, the lilies in the midst of our ashes, we must acknowledge that we cannot control the outcome. Healing is a gift that belongs to God, the God who knows our deepest needs. This means that the healing we want may not be the healing we receive, but we surely will receive healing. Like the forest after the fire, the

future remains yet unknown, though we do know that new life is coming, that lilies will arise out of our ashes. God's Easter promise is that suffering will never have the last word, that pain will never have the final say, that the fire will not just leave a barren landscape, but instead, **that new life will arise.**

In the midst of the ashes, we may feel called to cry out, to lament. This is not only appropriate. It is holy. There's an entire biblical book devoted to Lamentations! Even Jesus cried out and wondered why God had forsaken him. But the ashes of lament that fill our mouths will eventually give way to the lilies of healing, to the promise of redemption, to the abundance of life seen in an empty cross, an empty

tomb, and in the resurrected body of our crucified Lord. Lamentation looks toward a future of praise.

Ashes and lilies are part of the Lenten journey.

We are on our way to the lilies, but must walk through the ashes. We're here today to pray for healing, for deliverance, for life beyond the ashes, trusting in the Lord who walked through the ashes of the cross for us. We hope. We lament. We look for new life through the ashes. Amen.