

# Repairer of the Breach

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**Isaiah 58:1-12 and Matthew 6:1-21**

Ashes can be hazardous.

In some previous lifetime, I have come quite near to burning down a carport for the sake of ashes on the first Wednesday evening in Lent.

Yes, Ashes can be hazardous.

The smudges that we will soon wear on our foreheads or hands bear with them the remembrance of last year's hosannas—the songs we raised to the “king of Kings”—the triumph of Palm Sunday as we proclaimed our allegiance to the “one who comes in the name of the Lord.” But after 320 or so days, Lent has come again to remind us how fleeting such moments and such intentions can be. So, the dry palms from last year's triumphant procession are burned to ash, along with our best intentions, and we begin another Lenten season with the marks of mourning and repentance.

On this day, when we hear both the voices of Isaiah and Jesus warning us about misplaced piety and empty ritual, we might wonder if Ashes might not bear another hazard as well. Jesus reminds us, “Beware of practicing your piety [your righteousness] before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:1).

Ashes on ones forehead seem very visible to me, but I would argue that these marks—the ashen sign of the cross—bear with them an invitation to journey with Christ on the road to Jerusalem. They are an invitation to genuine piety and repentance that reminds us that our palms do turn to ash and all our human scheming eventually fades into a hillside adorned by a cross.

Ashes are an invitation to remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return; that our lives are fleeting and we are called to live them out in ways that reflect the one who created and sustains and redeems us.

Ashes are hazardous because they call us into a season for prayer, a season for alms, a season for fasting. These ashes call us into a season that holds the power to change us, to open our hearts to the point of breaking on behalf of God's love for the world.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus continues his Sermon on the Mount with thumbnail sketches that let us reflect on the difference between superficial [or even manipulative] piety and faithful attempts to live out the ongoing purposes of God.

We have heard the ways that we should NOT give, should NOT pray, should NOT fast, and we have heard admonishments to give and pray and fast in quiet ways that connect us to their purpose by connecting us to our God. Of all these things, Jesus spends much of his energy in this reading on prayer.

He dismisses discussion of posture and place, and of the need for the well-turned phrase. God, he assures us, “knows what you need before you ask” (Matthew 6:8). In his words, we are invited to recognize God’s parental love for us and God’s immense holiness. We are invited to recognize our daily bodily needs and pray for those; to grasp after the connection between forgiving and being forgiven; to plead for shelter from temptation and rescue from evil even as we acknowledge God’s sovereignty and power and glory, which makes this prayer worth praying.

But what makes my heart stutter is the phrase we blithely offer each week praying, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as in heaven.” In this phrase, Jesus has taught us to give the almighty and sovereign God an open invitation to reshape our very lives and send us out on journeys and on roads that we never intended to take.

And we thought ashes were risky...

I can tell you that even pastors yearn for a deeper prayer life, and certainly the Lenten Season is a time to cultivate deep prayer, but I wonder if we hesitate because to pray deeply **IS** to be changed. Forever.

Perhaps our Lenten fast this year might be a fast from self-preserving fear?

Fasting is such an established practice of Lent [particularly abstaining from things like meat] that it has found its place in our consumer culture. If you listen to the radio, you might hear the new ads for Tops Markets who have the “Money Saving Meatless Meal Idea of the Week.”

When I hear those ads, I hear the words of Isaiah voicing God’s question about whose interests are served in our fasting and imploring the people to fast in ways that are linked to God’s justice.

“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?” (Isaiah 58:6-7).

As with prayer, the practice of fasting invites us to be deeply connected to the purposes of God.

Perhaps this year we are invited to fast from the amusements and diversions that hold our attention and distract us from the state of the world so that we might instead seek solidarity with those around us who struggle.

Perhaps we are invited to fast from the consumption of goods and services that cannot fill our weary souls so that we might instead invest ourselves in the rebuilding of lives and of restoring “streets to live in.”

Perhaps we are invited to fast from our busy-ness that holds companionship and community and communion and friendship at bay so that we might instead share ourselves with others and share the love that will not let us go.

Perhaps we are invited to refrain from some things so that we might partake of a different thing—a different reality that Jesus calls the kingdom of God. In that reality, Isaiah promises, the Lord will guide us continuously, satisfy our need in parched places, make our bones strong, and help us become the repairer of the breach.

And so we will mark our foreheads—an outward sign of an inward plea for grace and courage and strength.

Ted Loder offered just such a plea using these words:

Lord, grant me your peace, for I have made peace with what does not give peace, and I am afraid. Drive me deep, now, to face myself so I may see that what I truly need to fear is my capacity to deceive, and willingness to be deceived, my love of things and using of people, my struggle for power and shrinking of soul, my addiction to comfort and sedation of conscience, my readiness to criticize and reluctance to create, my clamor for privilege and silence at injustice, my seeking for security and forsaking the kingdom.

Lord, grant me your peace.

Instill in me such fear of you as will begin to make me wise, and such quiet courage as will enable me to begin to make hope visible, forgiving delightful, loving contagious, faith liberating, peace-making joyful and myself open and present to other people and your kingdom.

Friends, tonight and in the weeks to come, may these hazardous ashes call us to the risky business of prayer and fasting and giving. And by them, may we open our hearts and our eyes, our ears and our lives to God's purposes for the world. AMEN.