

## 1 Sermon, February 19, 2012

Texts: Daniel 9:1-10, Luke 10:1-16

Title: "Ash Wednesday Journey"

1. The smell of burning when we got off the plane in India
2. Lent is a journey of ashes – repentance, mortality
3. Much of the world is closer to ashes
4. Daniel's journey of ashes
5. Jesus & dust & ashes
6. Sneh Sadan

### 1. The smell of burning when we got off the plane in India

Most of you know that my wife, Marianne, and I went to India in October and November.

We flew into the International Airport in Delhi, and when we got out of the airport, the first thing we noticed was the smell. Air pollution. Sulfur Dioxide and smoke. That smell was with us in some form for most of the trip.

You see, in India, not only are there fewer air pollution regulations on factories and automobiles, but people burn their trash.

All over the parts of India we traveled to, once a day, people would sweep their yards, put the debris in a pile, and light it. In businesses on the road, employees would sweep garbage into a pile and burn it.

And as you can imagine, a mixture of leaves and candy wrappers and old banana peels doesn't burn completely; it produces a lot of smoke.

### 2. Lent is a journey of ashes – repentance, mortality

When I met with a group from this church a week and a half ago, they urged me to explain Ash Wednesday, which is coming up in a few days. We know Ash Wednesday is the first day of the season of Lent, but why the ashes?

In a world where we worry about germs and contamination, why would we let someone smear our forehead with ashes? Why would we purposely get dirty?

## 2 **Sermon, February 19, 2012**

Why would we take the dead palm branches from the previous Palm Sunday almost a year before, and burn them to produce ashes, and then put them on people?

### 3. Much of the world is closer to ashes

Well, I think you know the answer. Why do we choose to do anything that is inconvenient or unclean? It's because there's some greater meaning or purpose.

The reason to put ashes on is to remind us that as clean as the world seems for us, as healthy as we may appear, that we are fragile and mortal and dependent upon God.

Here in the US, we put our garbage out of sight. Death and sickness are hidden away.

But most of the world lives with ashes.

While in India, Marianne and I took a 24 hour train trip from Benares to Dehra Dun. At one point, I had a plastic bag with some trash, and I wanted to throw it out. So I went to the area at the end of the car and asked where to throw the trash. The helpful railway employee told me to throw it down a hole that would put it out onto the track. I felt terrible about it, but I did.

I should have learned from that experience. While riding in a taxi in the mountains, I wanted to get rid of a bag of trash with some wet wipes and things, and the taxi driver said he'd take care of it. He threw it out the window.

Dealing with my garbage made me feel vulnerable and responsible, and very much in need of grace. And that's how Ash Wednesday is supposed to make us feel: vulnerable, responsible and in need of grace.

### 4. Daniel's journey of ashes

### 3 Sermon, February 19, 2012

It seems that that's also exactly how Daniel felt when he prayed to the Lord for his own people, who had been sinful and disobedient to the Lord. Daniel was ashamed of the way the leaders of his own people had not listened to the prophets. He grieved over the way they had disobeyed the commandments and sinned against God.

So Daniel put on sackcloth – coarse cloth used for bags – and sat in ashes. Most of the ashes available to Daniel would have been ashes of cooking fires whose fuel was cow dung.

Sackcloth and ashes – Daniel humbled himself before God, acknowledging God's greatness and his own unimportance. Daniel knew that he was not separate from his own people, but he was a part of them. Their sins were his sins.

The scripture tells us that Daniel's prayer in sackcloth and ashes allowed God to give him understanding.

And I don't think that the sackcloth and ashes were the key; I think Daniel's humility was the key. Putting on sackcloth and ashes was the way he humbled himself before the Lord.

### 5. Jesus & dust & ashes

So, is humility the key to the meaning of Lent and Ash Wednesday?

Yup.

Today's reading from Luke shows Jesus sending out seventy-two followers into the world in humility. Jesus sent them out without moneybag, without a carrying bag, barefoot. Jesus sent these followers out with little to sustain themselves, so they were dependent upon the goodwill of others to feed and house them. That's humbling.

Yet the power of God was with them, they healed and they told people: "The Kingdom of God has come near to you."

Now, I don't know if humility opened them up to see the power of God at work, or if the power of God at work in them made them humble, or some combination of the two – but it's clear that humility and the power of God are close companions.

#### 4 Sermon, February 19, 2012

In today's scripture reading, he told the residents of a couple of Judean towns (Capernaum and Chorazin) that they had seen the power of God at work. But they weren't paying attention!

Jesus said that if a couple of foreign towns had seen what they'd seen, *they* would have repented in sackcloth and ashes!

Paying attention to the power of God should make us humble! That's what Lent is about – paying attention to the power of God. And if we do, it will make us humble.

If you think about it, the Ashes we'll use on Ash Wednesday at Olivet will be from the palms of Palm Sunday, when Jesus came into Jerusalem with the crowds cheering him; the power of God was made plain to the people. The palms let us see God's power; the ashes make us humble.

#### 6. Sneh Sadan

When Marianne and I were in the north of India, in the city of Dehra Dun, we visited a small branch of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity. The place was called "Sneh Sadan," and they took care of women who otherwise would not have anyone to take care of them. They looked after widows, the physically handicapped and the mentally handicapped.

Sister Marietta, an older member of the Missionaries of Charity, led us around the complex and introduced us to the residents. Sister Marietta had a joy about her, a gentleness and a disarming smile. She was genuinely delighted to tell us about the residents and about the world of Sneh Sadan.

A woman perhaps in her 20s came out to greet us, and gave everyone a hug. She was clearly mentally handicapped, but very happy.

We were introduced to another woman whose handicap was so disturbing that I could hardly look at it. This young woman's knees bent in the wrong direction. Her knees bent forwards instead of backwards, and she stood not on her feet, but on her shins that stuck out in front of her along the floor. She, too, was joyful and happy to see us!

There was a blind woman who had become independent, but because of misfortune had to return to Sneh Sadan, a girl, age 14 who could move nothing below her neck and just laid on a bed, and a number of older widows.

## 5 Sermon, February 19, 2012

Through all of these introductions, Sister Marietta was at peace and gently encouraging. She did not resent the interruption, but welcomed us strangers from the US, all the while exhibiting a deep caring for the women who lived there.

You could have said that the women who lived at Sneh Sadan lived with the taste of ashes in their mouths. They got the worst of what the world had to offer.

Yet by the grace of God, they were able to experience joy. They had nothing to lose, and their humility made them open to the power of God in a remarkable way.

Thanks be to God.

Daniel 9:1-10 (CEV)

**1-2**Daniel wrote:

Some years later, Darius the Mede, [a] who was the son of Xerxes, had become king of Babylonia. And during his first year as king, I found out from studying the writings of the prophets that the LORD had said to Jeremiah, " Jerusalem will lie in ruins for seventy years." **3-4**Then, to show my sorrow, I went without eating and dressed in sackcloth and sat in ashes. I confessed my sins and earnestly prayed to the LORD my God: Our Lord, you are a great and fearsome God, and you faithfully keep your agreement with those who love and obey you. **5**But we have sinned terribly by rebelling against you and rejecting your laws and teachings. **6**We have ignored the message your servants the prophets spoke to our kings, our leaders, our ancestors, and everyone else.

**7**Everything you do is right, our Lord. But still we suffer public disgrace because we have been unfaithful and have sinned against you. This includes all of us, both far and near--the people of Judah, Jerusalem, and Israel, as well as those you dragged away to foreign lands, **8**and even our kings, our officials, and our ancestors. **9**LORD God, you are merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against you **10**and rejected your teachings that came to us from your servants the prophets.

Luke 10:1-16 (CEV)

**1**Later the Lord chose seventy-two [a] other followers and sent them out two by two to every town and village where he was

## 6 Sermon, February 19, 2012

about to go. **2**He said to them: A large crop is in the fields, but there are only a few workers. Ask the Lord in charge of the harvest to send out workers to bring it in. **3**Now go, but remember, I am sending you like lambs into a pack of wolves. **4**Don't take along a moneybag or a traveling bag or sandals. And don't waste time greeting people on the road. **[b]** **5**As soon as you enter a home, say, "God bless this home with peace." **6**If the people living there are peace-loving, your prayer for peace will bless them. But if they are not peace-loving, your prayer will return to you. **7**Stay with the same family, eating and drinking whatever they give you, because workers are worth what they earn. Don't move around from house to house. **8**If the people of a town welcome you, eat whatever they offer. **9**Heal their sick and say, "God's kingdom will soon be here!" **[c]** **10**But if the people of a town refuse to welcome you, go out into the street and say, **11**"We are shaking the dust from our feet **[d]** as a warning to you. And you can be sure that God's kingdom will soon be here!" **[e]** **12**I tell you that on the day of judgment the people of Sodom will get off easier than the people of that town!

**13**You people of Chorazin are in for trouble! You people of Bethsaida are also in for trouble! If the miracles that took place in your towns had happened in Tyre and Sidon, the people there would have turned to God long ago. They would have dressed in sackcloth and put ashes on their heads. **[f]** **14**On the day of judgment the people of Tyre and Sidon will get off easier than you will. **15**People of Capernaum, do you think you will be honored in heaven? Well, you will go down to hell! **16**My followers, whoever listens to you is listening to me. Anyone who says "No" to you is saying "No" to me. And anyone who says "No" to me is really saying "No" to the one who sent me.

My friend, Wilma Jakobsen told me this joke a few years ago...

A priest was confronted by a mugger while walking down a dark alley. The thief demanded the priest's wallet. As the priest opened his coat to reach for his wallet, the thief saw a clerical collar and realized this was a priest. Immediately he apologized and said, "Forget it, Father, keep your money; I had no idea you were a priest." Both nervous and relieved, the priest took out a cigarette and offered one to the stranger. "No thank-you," the thief replied, "I gave up smoking for Lent!"

## 7 Sermon, February 19, 2012

Ring around the roses, pocket full of poses, ashes, ashes we all fall down. Many of have sung this little rhyme with our children, as children or at least have heard children singing it. We sing lots of these rhymes as young children but what do they actually mean? Well this little rhyme came out of a little event here in Europe called the Black Plague. Ring around the roses. It was thought that that this disease was airborne so if you placed flowers up to your mouth it was thought that you were breathing better air. Also doctors use to put roses and poses into their pockets and bring it into the patients for them to smell since they were stuck inside. But a darker way of reading this little rhyme is that they give you the symptoms of the plague itself. Ring around the roses. One of the early signs of the plague was your face would turn pale and you would get dark rosy cheeks. Pocket full of poses. People would carry the poses around in their pockets to ward off the Black Death. Ashes? Black pile to be exact. During the last days of the plague the patient would begin to expel dry black ash. Ashes, we all know these words from the Bible, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. It is probably guaranteed that someone will say those words at your funeral. We all fall down. Well we all know that eventually we will all fall down, a simple reminder that the end will come eventually.

Winston Churchill was once asked, "Doesn't it thrill you to know that every time you make a speech, the hall is packed to overflowing?" "It's quite flattering," replied Sir Winston. "But whenever I feel that way, I always remember that if instead of making a political speech I was being hanged, the crowd would be twice as big."

Ronald Reagan, recalling an occasion when he was governor of California and made a speech in Mexico City said this: "After I had finished speaking, I sat down to rather unenthusiastic applause, and I was a little embarrassed. The speaker who followed me spoke in Spanish -- which I didn't understand -- and he was being applauded about every paragraph. To hide my embarrassment, I started clapping before everyone else and longer than anyone else until our ambassador leaned over and said, 'I wouldn't do that if I were you. He's interpreting your speech.'"