Rev. Dr. Jennifer Lazzuri

Ash Wednesday

March 2, 2022

St. James Episcopal, Louisa

Isaiah 58: 1-12

Lent seemed to come early this year. Though, I believe technically, it is neither early or late this year, but rather almost in the middle - all determined by the paschal full moon and the Easter algorithm that for centuries has determined the date of Easter and thus Ash Wednesday.

Early or late, or just in the middle, Lent is a time to consider our mortality—to remember that we are creatures of the soil and to soil we shall return.

There’s plenty about our finitude worth reflecting on: the acts both large and small by which we diminish our humanity; the countless ways we hurt ourselves and those we love. Most of us are aware of our transgressions and our own mortality is ever before us.

It’s been painful to watch the events unfolding in Ukraine and Russia the past few weeks - Thomas Friedman, the author of ***The World is Flat*** and New York Times Opinion columnist, recently wrote an opinion article entitled “*We Have Never Been Here Before*.” (Feb. 25, 2022, New York Times). In it Friedman uses the words (which he admits to rarely ever daring to use) that “the world will never be the same.” And by that he means that this war in Ukraine has no historical parallel. It is happening in a world empowered by smart phones and Tik Tok and the acts of brutality of war will be documented in real time without editors and filters.

Putin is rewriting the rules of an international system on how we act in a global community that have been in place since World War II - but he is acting in ways that happened long before when a monarch or czar could simply decide he wanted more territory and take it.

It has been heart-wrenching to witness innocent people having to flee their homes and where they will go. It has been heart-wrenching to see some diminish these self-centered acts on social media, or to be flippant about it, or to focus only on themselves and how it will impact them. It is especially heart-wrenching to watch this war, because it was an unprovoked attack. Adolf Hitler said in speaking of war, “The beginning of every war is like opening the door into a dark room. One never knows what is hidden in the darkness.”

Which makes the past few days particularly anxiety producing for many. We don’t know what all this means and how are lives are going to change or be impacted, but I do believe we are on the precipice of a shift in the world as most of have known it for most of our lives. And not just because of this war - which is merely a symptom - bringing into clear focus for many of us, what can be considered a reflection of an idealogical shift on a world-wide scale over the past few decades.

So what does this have to do with Ash Wednesday, Rev. Jennifer?

There was another opinion guest essay released in the New York Times where the author espoused, *“This Lent, a Priest will not be telling me, ‘Remember that you are dust.’* The author shared some of her journey and disappointment and griefs over the past few years and did not feel she wanted or needed a Priest to remind her of these things. While others have found solace in their faith, she has found things alienating or enraging in her religious practice. She states she is done with the institutional church.

Both opinion essays grieved me. Because I will tell you what they both have to do with Ash Wednesday.

Ash Wednesday is a day that we are reminded that we are “but dust and to dust we shall return.” It is a day that calls us to repentance to focus on our mortality and our need for Christ.

The author of the last piece described herself as the “unchurched Christian faithful”, but in love and understanding I would want to argue with her. Not participating in the life of the community does not make you faithful. Nor does attending church every Sunday. Being faithful I may propose involves a both/and. Faithfully participating in life of the community as well as faithfully living your life outside of the church walls.

I have digressed.

Today on Ash Wednesday, we are reminded of our mortality, our need for Christ. We are reminded that our earthly lives are finite.

We are entering the season of Lent where we are reminded to be penitent. To ask forgiveness of our sins and to remind of us our need for Christ. We pray for God to create in us new and contrite hearts. Many give up things historically for Lent and there are movements that you don’t need to “give up anything” but rather maybe add something. Such as a new prayer, a new spiritual practice, etc. Whether you choose to give up something, add something, or do nothing in particular, we are reminded of why we exist and what we are called to mortally.

In the words of Isaiah,

58: 6-9

“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?*

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,

and your healing shall spring up quickly;

your vindicator shall go before you,

the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;

you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. “

Lent reminds us that we are all in the same boat—the sinking ship of our failed attempts to save ourselves, love ourselves, and save those we love. Russia’s attack on Ukraine is a reminder of that which is old is new again.

The ashes are not mere symbol; they are not a public sign of our piety (exactly what the gospel reading warns us against)

Instead, the ashes are a reminder.

The juxtaposition for us, for Christians, for the church, is as liberating as it is instructive: we are dying, yet we live. Death may be at our doorstep but it does not diminish today. We are alive in Christ, alive in one another, and alive in the hope that death does not have the last word. As we begin Lent, let us be reminded of these things. Of our need for Christ and each other.

Amen.