

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

“Ash Wednesday – A Fragile Life”

Online Worship Service

Wednesday, February 17, 2021

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell, Senior Pastor

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Introduction

Friends, it's been a rough week here in Michigan. The extreme cold has driven many of us inside; well, I should say, even deeper inside. As a result many of us may be feeling alone, isolated, tired. Really how could we *not* feel tired? It's been almost a year that all of us have been navigating change through this global pandemic, and it is tiring when you are constantly navigating uncertainty. But, friends, in those times when life is uncertain and we may feel alone, isolated, and tired, we have the blessing of being able to lean into the holy presence of God, for His strong love and care.

In this Ash Wednesday service, which marks the beginning of the holy season of Lent within our church, we acknowledge that our lives are fragile in every sense. But in this service we also proclaim that the God whom we worship is mighty to save, our God is faithful and true, beautiful and kind, holy and powerful. So here and now, let us take all that we are and in this time of worship bring it before all that God is.

All that you need for this Ash Wednesday service is a willing spirit, open to the whisper of God's call in our lives. We also need some basic communion elements, as we will be celebrating communion together later in our service.

Please take a minute and go find a cup of blessing, whatever you have available. Go find a piece of bread that'll point you to the *living bread*. Let's gather these elements, and then come let us worship God together.

Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor – Opening Prayer

Let us pray. Gracious God, out of your love and mercy you breathe into dust the breath of life, creating us to serve you and our neighbors. Call forth our prayers and acts of tenderness in this holy season. Strengthen us to face our mortality, that we may reach with confidence for your mercy.

This we pray in the strong name of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.

Congregation sings: “*What Wondrous Love Is This, Oh My Soul*”

April 19, 2019

Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor — Scripture Reading

Psalm 46 (NRSV)

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
- ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
- ⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
- ⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
- ⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
- ⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.
- ⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
- ⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
- ¹⁰ “Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.”
- ¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor — Prayer of Confession

Here, now, our call to confession.

We begin this holy season of Lent acknowledging our need for repentance, for the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Please join me now as we say in unison the prayer of confession as printed here today. Let us pray.

Almighty God, you despise nothing you have made, and you forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and contrite hearts that, truly repenting of our sins and acknowledging our brokenness, we may obtain from you, the God of all mercy, full pardon and forgiveness. In the name of your son Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — The Call to Observe a Holy Lent

Dear friends, often we begin this journey of Lent with the imposition of ashes. This ancient sign speaks to the frailty and uncertainty of human life and it marks the penitence within our own hearts and within the heart of our community.

I invite you, wherever you are today, as you are watching this, right now, to take your own finger, tap it on the table or desk in front of you. I want you to imagine that you are dipping your finger into the dark ash and then, with that same finger, make the sign of a cross on your forehead. With this gesture we remember that we have come from dust and to dust we shall return.

May God's holy work be accomplished in our living and in our dying. May we turn to God who made us, claimed us, redeemed us, and sustained us. May that God lead us to the joy of Christ's resurrection.

Friends, I invite you to join me in this holy practice.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Homily

Would you all please pray with me. God, our helper, by your Holy Spirit, open our minds, so that as the scripture is read and your word is proclaimed, we may be led, and your truth taught. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Friends, recently I had the opportunity with my family to watch a new movie on Netflix entitled, "The Dig". This movie, which stars Ralph Fiennes and Carey Mulligan, is a story, a true story actually, of how a British widow hires a self-taught archaeologist to dig up mysterious formations on her land, leading to a staggering find.

So 'The Dig' refers, as you can imagine, to an archaeological dig, and this story was a beautiful story. The cinematography is amazing in this movie. But what really captured my heart and my attention, as I watched it, is that this story of unearthing what lies beneath the ground is actually a story of one person's life and their struggle and loss framed into the larger story of struggle and loss, as this movie takes place on the eve of Britain entering World War II. That story of struggle and loss is unfolding in the midst of one person's individual story and what you see even more in this movie is that story of war and struggle and loss is framed in the larger narrative of what God is doing in the world at any particular time, and what our lives and our deaths all mean. And where do we understand God in all of this?

Friends, these deeper questions are unearthed through this movie. I appreciated it on so many levels, because in so many ways it reminded me of our experience today. Each of us, over the last year, have had our own personal stories of struggle, many of loss, as we have endured and weathered this global pandemic. Yet our stories are set within a larger narrative of the Covid global pandemic saga that's taking place throughout the entire world. We are just a pin in a story that's much bigger than our own and yet this story is framed in the larger story of what God is doing in the world today. What all this life and loss means, and where God is in all of it, is a story within a story within a greater story.

What I was struck by, from this movie, is the film suggests that if we want to find the deeper meaning and messages of life, we have to dig, we have to dig in the dirt to find it, to unearth what is there beneath. Isn't it interesting that the season of Lent actually begins by "digging in the dirt", as well, to unearth some of these deeper questions of life.

If you think about our Ash Wednesday service--it's the one service in the year where we really pay attention to the confession and repentance part of the service. We begin this Lenten journey by coming into God's holy presence, recognizing that we are *not* holy. We are in need of divine forgiveness and grace. We dig first into the dirt of our lives as we

identify all that separates us from God. We confess it before God as an act of worship, and in so doing we follow the words found in Psalm 51 that say:

“The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

God wants us more than anything to be honest in His presence and open to His power at work in our lives. As we begin this Lenten journey, there's no better way to do that than walking through that dirt of confession. If we needed a deeper reminder that we need to dig into the dirt as we begin this holy journey, the Ash Wednesday service also includes within it the imposition of ashes, where we are reminded of our mortality. As it says in Ecclesiastes, chapter 3, at verse 20:

“From dust we came and to dust we shall return.”

We realize that our lives are fragile. We also recognize, as we acknowledge our own fragility, that we do have a deep need for God's presence and power and peace in our lives, and a need to understand it in the world. As we move throughout this holy season, the challenge for each of us is to take our attention away from our own individual stories of struggle and to see, too, that larger story of struggle, as we understand ourselves as one person within a larger struggle of Covid. But the deeper challenge of faith in this holy season of Lent is to see our story within God's larger narrative, and not only that narrative of what God is doing now, but what God has been doing since the beginning of time, that we have the opportunity and privilege to be a part of today. In other words, we orient our life story into the larger story of God's holy purpose at work in the world today.

As we dig deeper into our need for God, I hope that the truth is recognized that there are blessings to be found in the process of digging deep. You know, ten years ago as a church we first learned the value of ‘digging deep.’ It was about ten years ago, well closer to twelve years now, but ten years since we started our first project with our sister church in Mtentera, Malawi. In April of 2011, we were busy at work building a well for our church partners in Africa and we wanted very much to partner with them. We supplied some of the parts needed in order to have the well, and our friends in Africa took it upon themselves to dig down 37 feet by hand before they realized that that was not nearly deep enough. They had to go deeper. So with our church friends we partnered, and together we found a drilling team in Africa that enabled them to dig down to 118 feet below the surface. It was there that we found the blessing of water, water that would sustain that community, would sustain that church, would sustain our partnership together. It took time and effort. It took failure and trying again and again, before we were successful, and ten years later the value of that well, and the storage tank of water that came with it, is a tremendous blessing to so many people in that community.

Friends, there is value in us digging deep in this holy season of Lent, deeper than we have before, into the Word of God, because that rich resource of blessing will continue to bless us through the years.

Here as a church we're launching into our own ‘dig’, as we go deeper into the gospel of John, particularly looking at the seven “I am” statements where God identifies himself in the words, “I am; I am the way, the truth, and the life; I am the gate; I am the true vine. There are many different attributes of God that we're going to dig into more deeply, and as we dig into each one, our hope is that our faith and our understanding of our own relationship to God will grow.

My challenge for you as we begin this Lenten season is to do your own digging! Dig into the gospel of John. It's unlike any of the other gospel narratives. See how our story fits into the larger story of creation and redemption and of grace.

Friends, Ashley read for us at the beginning of the service words from Psalm 46 that said, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble." That Psalm ends with the words, "The Lord almighty is with us."

My hope and prayer, as we dig deep in this Lenten season, is that we would realize that the Lord almighty truly is *with* us in our lives, in our individual struggles throughout this pandemic, and in the whole of our existence. May God bless us as we dig deep together. Amen.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Sacrament of Communion

Friends, we come to this table today because we love God a little and wish to love God more. Come and share these gifts of grace together.

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious and loving God, in this holy season of Lent, change our hearts. Make them ever true. Change our hearts. May they be more and more like yours, wondrous God. We do thank you and praise you today for the healing, help, and hope you bring to our lives.

You are the light that illumines our darkness. You are the strength that empowers our living. You are the hope that lifts our hearts in praise.

We do praise you today for your faithful love and care, which lasts even beyond our lifetime, but into eternity. For this resurrection hope, we thank you. We pray today for your hope to be realized in the hearts of all who are sick and all who suffer, either from loneliness or grief.

We pray, dear God, that your hope would come alive in the hearts and lives of all who wait, wait for their future to unfold, wait for their work to begin, wait for the light to break into their darkness. We do thank you, dear Lord, for the light that you bring.

We thank you for the grace that you offer at this table and the promises gifted to us by your Word.

Strengthen us in your grace, so that we may shine as your light and live for your glory.

This we ask in the strong name of Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,

and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.

Friends, on the night that He was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread and after he gave thanks to God his Father, he broke it, saying, "This is my body that is broken for you. Do this in memory of me." In the same way, after supper, Jesus took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant sealed by my blood. Whenever you drink from it, do so remembering me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again.

These are the gifts of God, given to the people of God. Let us share this meal together.

Combined Chancel Choirs
First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth and First United Methodist Church
"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"
(Ash Wednesday, February 26, 2020)

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Closing Prayer

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious and loving God, we thank you for the way that you have fed us by your Word, by your Spirit. We thank you for the nourishment you bring to our lives, the help and the hope and the grace. We pray that as we journey from here today, and deeper into this holy season of Lent, that you would help us to dig up all that separates us from you and help us to live our lives fully in response to your love and grace. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Benediction and Blessing

Friends, As we journey from here today and through this season of Lent, let us journey, committed to digging deeper, closer to God.

And as we go from here, may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest upon you and upon all those you love, this day and forever more. Amen.