

Welcome

Tonight begins our journey through Lent. And like any well-prepared traveler, we confess that we want to pack our bags to make sure we are comfortable for our 6-week journey. But Ash Wednesday is about leaving baggage behind and braving the unknown carrying nothing but the mark of God's beloved. Please join me in the call to worship...

Call to Worship

Leader: Friends and neighbors, in the middle of our busy week, we pause to observe Ash Wednesday together as a faith community.

People: We remember that God made us from fragile, blessed dust and breathes through us the breath of life and love.

Leader: From dust we are created in God's image and to God's good dust we shall return.

People: With dust and oil we claim the mark of God's beloved.

Leader: Today we begin our 40-day Lenten journey to discover who we are created to be as God's beloved.

People: In daily practices of prayer and service we will embark upon this Lenten journey.

Leader: We follow Jesus, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh in whom we see God's image most clearly.

All: So come, let us pray for strength and imagination to follow Jesus wherever he will lead us.

Please rise, in body or in spirit, and join together singing the **Hymn of Illumination**, Day is Done, number 92 in the hymnal

***Please join with me in the Invocation (Unison)**

Lord Jesus Christ, you have lain down your life for us, and seek us out when we go astray. Call us back from our wayward paths, and gather us into your flock, so that we may know the fullness of your salvation. Amen.

Please be seated. Our reading this evening is from the Gospel of John, Chapter 10, verses 1-18. It can be found on page 977 in your pew Bibles.

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.’

The word of the Lord... Thanks be to God.

Reflection

Whenever I watched *The Empire Strikes Back* as a kid, I would always fast forward through one particular scene because it terrified me. Luke Skywalker is training with Jedi Master Yoda on the swamp planet Dagobah when Luke feels the cold presence of death emanating from a nearby cave. *"That place is strong with the Dark Side of the Force,"* says Yoda. Luke asks, *"What's in there?"* And Yoda replies, *"Only what you take with you."*

Luke enters the cave, lightsaber in hand. From the shadows appears Darth Vader. They duel for a few desperate seconds, and then Luke cuts off Vader's helmeted head. The helmet comes to rest, and the black mask blows off, only to reveal Luke's own face.

Creepy, right? As a child, this scene terrified me because Darth Vader was really scary, and the darkness of the cave and the musical score only added to my fear. As an adult, watching this scene still touches my heart with fear, but fear of a different kind: fear of the truth that Luke discovers in the cave and that I discover whenever I look within myself.

Like Luke, I am my own worst enemy.

The cave on Dagobah is empty save for what Luke takes with him; indeed, in the cave he fights himself. So I ask myself, what would I unconsciously take into that cave? What battles within me?

First there's my pride, which too often keeps me from asking for help. It makes me want to do a project on my own. Pride battles with my goal to be a collaborator, to seek partners, to be part of a team. I want to be in charge.

Next there's my kneejerk desire for recognition; that attitude that says I should be a world-recognized blogger by now if only people understood my talent. It causes me to resent those of my pastoring friends who write for the UCC's daily devotional, or who have successfully published books. Someday, I swear, a book on the theology of Strawberry Festival will be in the making! My need to be recognized gets in the way of my goal to build up those same friends, to be a true supporter and encourager.

Finally, there's my complacency, which seduces me to take as few risks as possible, to play it safe, to take comfort in the status quo. My complacency battles with my call to participate in God's mission, a mission that dreams of something so much better than today's brokenness.

Like I said, I am my own worst enemy. My pride, my desire for recognition, and my complacency make up three of the many pieces of myself that I wish I could be rid of but are just so hard to give up. That's enough to confess to you tonight, isn't it?

I'd be willing to bet you feel the same way. I'd be willing to bet you have shadowy parts of yourselves that get in your own way sometimes. I'd be willing to bet that there have been times when you have been your own worst enemy.

If so, then tonight's Gospel lesson is written precisely for you. Jesus paints a picture that would have been familiar to his listeners but is maybe a little less familiar to us.

Imagine a windswept plain. A shepherd leads his flock to their sheepfold, a simple cave hollowed out of one of the hills on the edge of the field. Then, he lies down in the entryway to seal off the enclosure. Thieves and bandits and wolves will have a difficult time getting in with the shepherd on guard. The sheep can sleep soundly, knowing they are safe and protected.

Now obviously, morning will eventually come and the sheep can't spend their whole lives in the sheepfold, no matter how safe the enclosure may be. There's no food or water in the fold, after all. It may have been a safe and cozy place to spend the night, but eventually the sheep must follow the shepherd out of the fold in order to take care of their need for nourishment.

Jesus' choice of words here is telling: "*When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them.*" Unfortunately, this is a case of a weak English translation from the Greek. The word translated "brought out" crops up again and again in the Gospel, but it is not usually as serene and benign as here with the sheep.

In fact, we hear this same word every time Jesus casts out a demon. We hear this same word when Jesus makes a whip and throws the moneychangers out of the temple. We hear this same word when Jesus speaks of driving out the "*rulers of this world.*"

In every other instance of this word, Jesus is doing some sort of battle: he is pulling, throwing, yanking, driving, exorcising, casting out.

Now, perhaps those dimwitted, woolly animals trod placidly from the fold every morning at the beckoning of the shepherd.

But Jesus is, of course, not talking about real sheep. He's talking about us, about you and me, we who are our own worst enemies.

Of course, we want to stay in our sheepfolds. It's warm in there. It's safe and comfortable and predictable.

We want us to remain in the sheepfold because there is nothing threatening. If we stay in the cave, we will avoid being challenged by the growth that happens when we venture forth. That's why we need Jesus, our Good Shepherd to cast us out of our sheepfolds.

He knows us so well; Jesus knows we are our own worst enemies. And so he promises two things: to throw us out of our comfort zones, those places where our worst enemies thrive. And he promises to go ahead of us when the status is no longer quo. He promises to blaze our trail into the unknown so that when we arrive, one thing at least is known: his abiding presence.

At the end of today's passage, Jesus reveals his dream for us: "*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*" This life is available to all for all time. But maybe, just maybe, we are not always available to it.

I wonder what pieces of yourselves you would identify as your worst enemies? What do you bring with you into that cave on Dagobah, only to do battle with once you are inside? I bring into my cave pride, a need for recognition, and complacency.

And whenever I settle in, let me tell you, I feel oh-so-comfortable.

At least for a minute. Because after that brief moment of leaden familiarity, I feel something else. I feel the hands of Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd, grasping me by the shirt and yanking me out. He sets me down outside my comfort zone, outside the status quo, outside the reach of my worst enemies – my own selfish need for power and recognition and my desire for complacency. And then he goes before me, pointing out the riches of his abundant life along the way.

A Chance to Let Go

In this vulnerable place, Jesus whispers to us that we are made in the divine image and that faithfulness to that knowledge is all we really need.

So let us take this time to pray about what it is that we may let go of this Lent, in order to help us become loving disciples. May what we give up enable us to follow Jesus out of our cave more bravely and confidently.

Take the scrap paper that you received on your way in to worship tonight and write a prayer, a reflection, a word or an image of what you are ready to let go of this Lent. As the worship finishes, we will depart out the front door and burn them in the bonfire.

(five minutes of reflection time)

Please remain seated for the **Hymn of Meditation**, Dust and Ashes Touch Our Face, number 186 in the hymnal

Marking with Ashes

At the very beginning, God scooped up the dust of the earth and molded it into human beings, breathing divine breath into those creatures of dust. Over time though, we dust creatures have forgotten who we are and whose we are. We believed a serpent in the Garden of Eden who said we could become like God. We believed that the gold calf Aaron made could guide us in the wilderness. We believed the builders of Babel who thought by our own hands we could be greater than God.

We have covered up with leaves and clothes. We have stopped taking time to walk with God in the gardens of the world.

But God does not stop finding ways to meet us. God spoke through a burning bush, a whisper, a cloud pillar, the laws given to Moses, and then through Jesus Christ. Through his teachings and calls to discipleship, Jesus exposed our lies of self-sufficiency. Our sinful pride is brought into the light. Our dusty nature is right there on the surface.

Come forward to reclaim the dust with which you were formed. Come forward to recognize your need for the God who created you and for the savior who desires to wash you clean.

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Holy God, with whom we walk this Lenten path, bless us tonight as we begin the long walk to the cross. Come to this place and remember your covenant with us. Shower your Spirit upon us for we need direction on this long road ahead. Care for us, your children, as we walk this winding path, following the footsteps of your Son, Jesus Christ, 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.

Parting Hymn (seated) God of Grace and God of Glory (verses 1-3)
NCH 436

Benediction, Silent Departure & Burning of the Confessions

Blessings, like God's love, are not one-way experiences. As you have been blessed with the mark of God's love you are now called to go out from this place and bless others.

May the God who created you create opportunities of serving the least, the lost and the lonely. May the Christ who teaches you teach you during Lent how to love all. And may the Spirit of Gentleness be your companion all your days. Amen.