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In his commentary on today's reading from Matthew, ordained Presbyterian elder Cláudio Carvalhaes describes an Ash Wednesday service he attended with people who were homeless.

"[They are] like walking ashes while alive. In that service, it made no sense to put ashes on the forehead of the homeless for they know, better than any of us, what it is to remember their mortality. ... In many ways, to pay attention to the homeless is to have ashes placed on our foreheads. They are the sign of our own death, the death of our systems of care and mutuality. They are the presence of our absence in acts of justice, they are the necessary absence of our society so we can feel we can exist."*

Not easy reading. And not limited to just what homelessness reveals about us. We face many mirrors — war, white supremacy, climate change, economic injustice — which reveal the underside of our lives together. These Ash Wednesday readings invite us to look deeply, honestly, knowing that with our God, it is safe to do so.

JOEL 2:12-18

The Book of Joel describes an otherwise unknown locust plague. We don't know if it was real or metaphorical; actual locusts or an invading army. In some ways, it doesn't matter because the underlying theological theme is true regardless. The book wrestles to locate God amidst disaster; a God who participates rather than protects.

In his commentary on today's reading, Hebrew Scripture scholar, Terence E. Fretheim describes Joel as a "cultic prophet," a prophet who exercised his ministry within the life of the temple, familiar with liturgical forms. In today's reading, the liturgical dimensions are everywhere, they are an essential part of the solution.

Oddly, for an Ash Wednesday reading, the call to repentance is nearly absent. When repentance is needed, a specific sin is usually named. Joel does not name a sin, nor a need for repentance. He does not cite the commonly used reference to forgiveness found in Exodus 34: 6-7. Rather, the people are called to gather and focus on God with all their heart and soul and to plead for God to act on their behalf. As Fretheim notes in his commentary, this indicates a lament which, as a communal act in a time of crises, would include fasting, weeping, mourning, rending of hearts. God is asked for relief from the crises, not forgiveness.

The prophet seems to see the world created by God as having the potential for natural disasters. A plague is part of the way the world works, and God enables or mediates such events. Only in that sense did God “send” the plague. Joel calls the community to turn to God in prayer, asking to be returned to their normal situation.

Joel calls the community to appeal to a certain kind of God, one who is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and rich in kindness, steadfast in love, and ready to relent from doing harm. Here, Fretheim notes that Joel is using a creed first seen in God’s self-revelation to Moses in Exodus 34: 6-7a, though it is also found in several other references (Jonah 4:2, Numbers 14:18, Nehemiah 9:17, 31; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145: 8; and Nahum 1-3). “The use of this creed in varying Old Testament contexts witnesses to its ongoing helpfulness for God’s people in various seasons of life.”

Specific liturgical aspects are emphasized: where the liturgy should be, how the priests should behave, what prayers should be spoken. It must be an inclusive gathering. In a commentary regarding this passage, Esther M. Menn suggests that such a “radical inclusivity parallels the promise later in Joel that the outpouring of the divine spirit will be on all flesh, so that all prophesy, dream dreams, and have visions, as signs of God’s presence within the entire community (2:28).”

Such gatherings for reasons of survival in hard times reorient us toward the kind of God Joel describes, even when trouble overwhelms. The liturgical gathering can strengthen and support us for the struggles ahead. Liturgy can make survival possible.

PSALMS 51:3-4, 5-6ab, 12-13, 14, 17

Musician and theologian, Prof. Eric Mathis says that resurrection begins with death further elaborating, “This particular leg of the journey is more like a restless night that is empty, lonely, and downright uncomfortable.” To further emphasize this concept, Mathis quotes Joy Jordan-Lake from her book, *Why Jesus Makes Me Nervous: Ten Alarming Words of Faith*:

Resurrection begins not with triumphantly toppled stones, empty tombs, and the masses agape in amazement, but before that. With death. With woundedness and mourning and betrayal, things done and undone, with understanding that dust and disaster and deceit are where we’ve landed.

Psalm 51 presents just such a picture. It is a lament. A song about knowing and owning one’s own sin. And because the psalmist felt it safe enough to admit his sin before God, it is a psalm about what kind of God he prayed to.

And what is this God’s character? Steadfast love, merciful, cleansing us even as we fail. We are safe here, free to be honest about our sins and limitations.

We learn that the most significant effects of our failings and sins are not against ourselves and others, but against YHWH who, nevertheless, is understood to have transforming power and the ability to bring change, to do new things. A contrite spirit is what YHWH seeks, not just ritual and praise.

Finally, the psalmist thinks about life after transformation. The reconciled will bear the message of reconciliation, an external response will flow no matter the penalty.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:20—6:2

Just prior to today’s reading, 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 set out the contours of reconciliation. It is not just the work of well-intentioned believers, but of God in and through Jesus Christ. This is Paul’s understanding of his ministry and of the life to which we are called.

As a result, Paul’s call in today’s reading, “be reconciled to God” (5:20b), is not only a plea for reconciliation with the apostle himself but also with the meaning and mission of his ministry. And now is the time, his final exhortative words say, time for this reconciliation as that which carries on God’s work through Christ.

Karoline Lewis, associate professor of Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary, suggests that it is not entirely clear what “working together” (6:1) means here. Is it Paul and Timothy as joint ministers of the congregation or, because of the reconciliation made possible through Christ, is it Paul, Timothy, and the Corinthians together. She states:

"It may be that the command to “be reconciled to God” will have its full meaning only when the Corinthians see themselves as working together with the apostles, trusting that God in Christ is about reconciling the world to God’s self.”

What does it mean that we have been entrusted with the message of reconciliation? Lewis suggests that it is necessary to contextualize today’s selection by reading the two prior verses:

And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (5:18-19)

She goes on to point out that “to us” in Verse 19 is better translated from the Greek as “in us.” She says: “Quite literally, it is the word of reconciliation that is established, put, placed, laid, arranged, or fixed in us.”

Reconciliation is something we are as well as do, an empowered process for a new creation. “Be reconciled to God” is an invitation to participate. The need for reconciliation is real and immediate. Now is the acceptable time, and in those moments of reconciliation, we will indeed witness the dawn of the day of salvation.

MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-18

Context is crucial here. There is nothing wrong with almsgiving, prayer or fasting but in Jesus’ time and place these had become the sole required signs of a piety in a rather twisted form of Jewish belief. Carvalhaes calls the historical moment the “Olympics of Piety.”

We do this. We turn a good thing into the only thing and then put it in competition with everything else. Carvalhaes notes that almsgiving, prayer and fasting had been put into competition not only with each other, but with all aspects of Jewish identity. How you lived no longer mattered. A man would stand on a corner and pray as loudly as possible in order to be heard because that was how one manifested piety. Like the Olympians, those who prayed were in a piety competition. How the rest of life was lived was immaterial. Any semblance of balance had been lost. These gestures had become disconnected from any inward belief or conviction.

This is what Jesus addresses in today’s reading. A false piety had replaced active fidelity and was undermining the Jewish understanding of what YHWH required.

This is an object lesson for us and our ever-present tendency to make a God of what is not God. To worship what is not holy. To confuse ego with fidelity.

According to Jesus, if we follow these false ways, we have already received our reward. That’s it. We’ve settled. Jesus repeats this over and over: “They have received their reward.” So, we can’t say we haven’t been warned.

And there was so much more to receive in the fuller recompense from God. What a cruel thing to do to ourselves. What a never-ending loss to have settled for so little when so much was offered.

***Editor’s note:** The author of this column has drawn from and quoted several commentaries found at www.workingpreacher.org/preaching. To explore these sources, search by the commentator’s name or scriptural passage.

Prayers: Ash Wednesday

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent, a time set aside to examine our ways, repent our failings and imitate God's love and mercy. The practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving as well as the corporal and spiritual acts of mercy are encouraged. The season culminates in the Easter liturgies, the Triduum, as the church recalls the paschal mystery. With hope and grace, we welcome this season of repentance and renewal.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you welcome the sinner, Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you heal the wounds of humankind, Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, lead us in ways of your love and grace, Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider My friends, let us pray for the needs of all gathered here and the needs of our world.

Minister For the church as we enter this holy season, for detachment from things that distract us from what matters most, for grace to return to God with all our hearts ... we pray,

- For our country, for responsible leadership and civil dialogue among us; for courage to speak for those who have no voice, for compassion to care for the poor, and for perseverance to pursue the common good ... we pray,
- For grace to enter these 40 days with openness to the Holy Spirit; to seek the merciful Lord in prayer, fasting and generosity ... we pray,
- For the sick and those who live with chronic illness, for those who daily face addiction or live with depression, for surrender to the grace of God's healing love ... we pray,
- For all who have died, with hope in the Lord's promise of eternal life, we remember_____ (names) and for all of our beloved dead ... we pray,

Presider Gracious God, you who are the source of mercy and love, open our hearts to the joy of repentance and renewal. Help us embrace the opportunity to take stock of our lives and be renewed in faith. As you give us wisdom to do your will, lead us always in your love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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