

By Ken Woodley for 2021

A Year Of Ash Wednesdays

So this is Ash Wednesday.

Again.

It sometimes feels that the world has had 12 months of Ash Wednesdays, to go along with Ash Mondays and Tuesdays that preceded Ash Thursdays and Fridays, that came just before Ash Saturdays and, sadly, Ash Sundays, as well.

Ironically, the last service I attended at St. Anne's with all of us gathered together in the sanctuary as a congregation, was Ash Wednesday, last year, February 26, 2020.

Kim was part of the worship team that night, so I took our daughter, Kate, to the Lynchburg airport for her early evening flight home and I made it back here just in time for the service.

Kate was taking off for Mississippi and I had no idea, none of us did, that a pandemic was about to land all around us.

Because of a book-related event, Kim and I were unable to attend the Sunday, March 1, service and the next thing we knew our church services were shut down because of the coronavirus.

In some ways it has felt as if Ash Wednesday lasted the rest of the year and into this new year, too.

Here we are, celebrating Ash Wednesday via this video. I am grateful for this chance to be with all of you but I desperately miss passing the peace in person.

I think that now I would probably never let go of the handshakes and the hugs.

I'm not going to miss having ashes rubbed into my forehead tonight because the past year has covered me with its ashes from head to toe.

Instead, I want those ashes washed from the entirety of my body.

But even if it were possible to wash them all away, they'd only come right back because there are ashes everywhere.

The ashes of social distancing.

The ashes of going nowhere without a mask.

The ashes of our exile from the sanctuary of St. Anne's.

The ashes of, once more, no church services.

The ashes of being in exile from each other.

The ashes of again being without a priest.

The ashes of silenced songs and voiceless hymns.

The ashes of fear.

My nephew had COVID-19 in the fall and our family knows people who have lost loved ones to the pandemic.

The ashes have touched everyone and everything in some way over the past 12 months.

The pandemic has seemed to take all of the biggest and brightest colors in the world and break them into little pieces.

Broken pieces for the broken days and broken weeks and months in a broken year.

Indeed, there have been times when it felt like the relentless and remorseless ashes were the alpha and the omega. That in the beginning there were ashes, only ashes, and that ashes covered the day, that ashes smothered the sun, turning the day into night.

But that is not the truth.

That would be a lie.

We will not fall prey to that deception.

We will pray and rise in truth.

A few years ago I gave an Ash Wednesday sermon that had a recurring refrain that I need now more than ever.

“Let the ashes remind us of the flame.

Let the ashes remind us of the flame.”

For there is, as always, one among us whom we cannot see but we can surely feel.

As sure as you are sitting in your home and I am sitting here in mine, the Holy Spirit, the grace-filled presence of Jesus is among us all.

Right here. And now.

Because the Lord *is* our shepherd, we *shall not* be in want.

He does make us lie down in green pastures,

He will lead us beside still waters.

He does restore our soul.

On Lenten journeys and every journey.

So let the ashes remind us of the flame.

Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death we will fear no evil for the Lord is indeed with us.

His rod and staff, they do comfort us.

He does prepare a table before us
in the presence of our enemies.

So let the ashes remind us of the flame.

He anoints our head with oil,
our cup does overflow.

Surely, surely, surely goodness and love will follow us
all the days of our life
and we very definitely shall live in the house of the Lord forever.

So let the ashes remind us of the flame.

But let us not lie down in green pastures alone,
nor sit in solitude beside the still waters,
because the valley of the shadow of death
is filled with countless souls who need to feel
the comfort of his rod and staff,
who need to eat from the table
and feel their head anointed with oil,
their cup overflowing,
and that they, too, have goodness and love

dogging their every footstep
on the way to the house of the Lord.

So let *our* ashes help remind *them* of the flame.

Because a shoot did come up from the branch of Jesse;

From his roots a branch did bear fruit.

The Spirit of the Lord did rest upon him—the
Spirit of wisdom and understanding...

So let all of our ashes remind all of us of the flame.

For surely one day the wolf *will* lie with the lamb,

And the leopard shall lie down with the goat,

The calf and lion and the yearling together.

And may the wolves and the lambs,

the leopards and the goats,

the calves and the lions and the yearlings

begin their journey toward one another,

not just out in the world,

but deep within us,

because that is how the kingdom of heaven

begins to enter the world.

And oh how the world needs that.

So let the ashes remind us of the flame.

Because COVID-19 has not been alone in dumping ashes across our landscape. Even when hope about effective vaccines began to blossom as 2020 was coming to a close, the flowers of our democracy were trampled.

The results of the presidential election were questioned and then attacked by those who sought to overturn the will of the American people. The horror movie we'd all been living since last March took on even more apocalyptic dimensions with mob violence at the U.S. Capitol on January 6 that threatened the very foundations of this nation.

The scenes, and what they meant, were truly frightening. It was a a domestic 9-11. I heard words spoken and saw misdeeds done that I never could have imagined taking place in this country. COVID-19 wasn't the only virus stalking our land.

But there are other words calling us to other deeds and the voice of Jesus in the The Beatitudes has never rung with deeper resonance.

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn,
for they shall be comforted.

May we be instruments of the Lord's comforting grace during this Lenten journey, and on every journey.

And may the ashes remind us of the flame.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

May the wings of those angels have our hearts and minds,
may they have our arms and legs
on our Lenten journey, and on every journey.

And may the ashes remind us of the flame.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons and daughters of God.

May that vision beat with our heart and may we be those children of God on our Lenten journey, and every journey.

So let the ashes remind us of the flame because, while there are vaccines for COVID-19, there is no vaccination against the dark side of human nature.

For our St. Anne's family on this Wednesday, February 17, 2021, may the ashes of our exile from one another remind us of the flame of our togetherness.

Let the ashes of our silent sanctuary remind us of the flame of our voices raised in song.

May the ashes of our distance remind us of the flame of our touch.

And may we share that touch in healing ways that no pandemic can take away.

Social distance does not shackle our ability to actively love one another.

A mask cannot hide the loving actions of a smiling heart.

Yes, the pandemic did seem to take all of the world's biggest brightest colors and break them into little pieces, and subsequent political events broke them even more.

But that gives all of us the chance to turn them into stained glass windows so that the sun may shine through us all into a world too filled with darkness.

So let the ashes remind us of the flame.

And may we all flicker brightly as a light for all the world.

As Jesus hoped we would.

Amen.