

Ash Wednesday, 2025  
Wilmore Free Methodist Church Pastor Daryl Diddle  
Forgiveness - Beauty for Ashes

Isaiah 61:1-3 The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, for the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed. 2 He has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of the Lord's favor has come, and with it, the day of God's anger against their enemies. 3 To all who mourn in Israel, he will give a crown of beauty for ashes, a joyous blessing instead of mourning, festive praise instead of despair. In their righteousness, they will be like great oaks that the Lord has planted for his own glory.

-----Message-----

Who we are?

We humans – every one of us – we were all born into this situation of being separated from God...the prophet Isaiah says, because of the sinfulness that's part of us...that's within us. Isaiah actually paints an awful picture of humanity going our own way...a rebellious and destructive way...that leads us very far from God.

So who **are** we?

We're a people who need **help!** We won't...we can't survive on our own. We're a people in eternal peril, and along with all creation, because of our sin, our separation from God is a trouble that we cannot solve.

Pause

Who is God?

That's the next question. The hymn writer gave us a couple dozen adjectives there describing Him – immortal, invisible, wise, hidden, blessed, glorious and almighty...just to name a few.

But the Psalmist goes further. He lets us know that God is pure and majestic. He said there in verse 4 that God makes the winds his messengers, which is good for us to understand, considering all this breeze we've had in the last day. It's good to know that God has a word for us in it.

The Psalmist says that God is also the maker of all things, both small and large. He's the maker of us!

And...He's the provider **of** all and **for** all. He gives His creation all it needs...all **we** need.

But what do we need?

What is our need?

In short, we need everything, don't we? We need food and drink, we need shelter and shade. We need love and purpose and direction and peace.

The fact is, we are dependent people, with so, so many needs in our lives.

But you know, we all do have one need, beyond every other. Our supreme need...humanity's supreme need is, in a word, forgiveness.

God is high. God is mighty. God is holy.

We...are not.

He wants us to be. He made us to be...like Him...holy. But we chose our own way.

We walked away from the One who made us for Himself, and so now we are wounded and hurt.

All of us are.

We are disfigured and we are trapped.

In our rebellion, we have broken God's creation. We have broken others and we have broken ourselves. We're like a caged, crazed and cornered animal; we lunge this way and that. We lash out, but when we do, all we do is run headlong into the bars that confine us...or we run into each other, and in so doing, we compound our pain and that of those around us.

What is our need?

We need repaired. We need restored. We need released. We need to be reclaimed. And the path to all those runs through redemption. The way to restoration runs through forgiveness...the forgiveness of God...the One who made us.

I think, deep down, we all know that. Deep down, we know we need to be forgiven.

And thanks be to God, He knows that too!

And not only does He know it, God did something about it.

Forgiveness is exactly why God the Father sent Jesus.

Forgiveness is why one of the very first things Jesus did as He began His public ministry was to stand up in front of all those who'd known Him for so long...and recite, in their hearing, the words of the prophet, Isaiah, declaring the arrival of good news!

Good news to we who desperately needed it!  
Good news!

What we need...God has sent...in Jesus.

Jesus brings comfort for the broken.  
Jesus brings freedom for the trapped.  
He brings peace to the mourning.  
He brings divine favor to those who suffer.  
Jesus comes with justice for those who've been wronged.

He offers a reason for praise to those in despair.

In Jesus, God provides to us relief and release, because Jesus brings what we need most: forgiveness. Forgiveness. Pardon. Freedom. These are the blessings to all in Jesus, and in our receiving them, God turns, Isaiah says, our ashes of sorrow and mourning and pain into a crown of beauty.

That darkness that rests upon us because of our rebellion and sin...Jesus replaces it with a sparkling crown of righteousness. He gives us the privilege of returning to our place of holiness...of being with God as His child...forever.

To restore us to our glory...for His glory.

It was something we could do for ourselves.

It was all God's idea.

It was God's initiation.

And...even today, it's God's offer...to meet our need of forgiveness...through His Son, Jesus.

For the Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon **Him** and the Lord has anointed **Him**...to bring the good news of comfort, freedom, favor, justice, blessing, praise, righteousness...to bring beauty for ashes...to bring forgiveness...to us.

-----Invitation-----

Earlier today, for the second year in a row, I was invited to introduce Ash Wednesday to a class of 20 preschoolers in Nicholasville. Now, this is a little challenging in that you don't want to lead off by telling them, "You are made of dust and to dust you will return."

So how do you explain this?

I told them that since Jesus showed us that He loves us by dying on a cross for us, we can show Him that we love Him by wearing a cross.

Now, I realize that's not a perfect illustration or explanation or symbol, but that is, in the simplest terms, the reason for Ash Wednesday.

Jesus bore a cross for us.

We bear a cross for Him...but not only for Him, of course.

We bear a cross to **show others, and to remind ourselves**, that redemption...reunion with God...forgiveness...comes to us no other way but through a cross.

In simple terms, that's what this season of Lent does...and that's what Ash Wednesday is about: bringing the cross...the forgiveness it represents, and our need for it, back into focus in our lives.

Pause

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the first followers of Jesus observed, with great devotion, the days of our Lord's suffering, death and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for those days through a season of penitence and fasting.

This season of Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for baptism. It was also a time when those who, because of their public sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful, were, through repentance and forgiveness, restored to the fellowship of the Church.

In these ways the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and forgiveness set forth in the gospel, and of the need which all Christians continually have...to renew their repentance and faith.

Therefore, in the name of the Church and Her Savior, I invite us all to the observance of a holy Lent, to use these days to examine ourselves...  
to let the Spirit freely examine us...  
to pray and fast, to read and study the Scriptures...  
and to respond as the Spirit speaks to us...  
to repent as necessary...  
to seek the forgiveness of others...and...  
to seek of others and of God any forgiveness needed so as to attain the holiness that is required of us as followers of Jesus.

Pause

To make a right beginning of this season, let us pause now and listen for the Lord to speak to us about who we are, who He is, our great need of forgiveness, and what God has done to meet it.

-----Silence-----

Almighty God, we are aware of who we are and of who you are.

We are aware of our great need...and we are, tonight, aware and so grateful of what you have done in Jesus, for our sake.

Would you grant that these ashes may be to us a sign and reminder, not only of our mortality, but also of the tremendous forgiveness provided by Jesus...Your gracious gift...Your Son...our Savior.

Beginning today and throughout Lent this year, let us give up only those things that help us understand and embrace the cross more fully, more completely, more reverently.

As Jesus bore the cross for us, send your Spirit to help us bear, not just a cross of ash, but every burden, every difficulty, every cross life may bring to us...for your glory.  
Amen.

May all of us in Christ tonight bear His cross, and know that we're forgiven.

-----Imposition of Ashes-----

Bear the cross of Jesus, and know that you're forgiven.