

**Glyndon United Methodist Church**

**Quiet Service of Ashes**

**February 18, 2015 12 noon**

**The quiet service allows each person to reflect and receive at their own pace. You may read the devotional prayers and then receive the ashes or oil. You may choose to receive and then read at home. May God bless your forty day journey…**

**PREPARE**

The world around us is upside down - wars, droughts, wrongful imprisonments, riots, hunger! Our own lives are often upside down - afflictions, hardships, sleepless nights, transgressions!

We know that our world is broken. We know that we are broken.

God calls out, “Return to me, return to me with all your heart!”

We gather before you and call out to you, “Have mercy on us and on our world, O God. Have mercy on us!”

 **PRAY**

We turn to you, God of life, on this first day in Lent as we recall our own mortality. With hearts torn open by our actions, we need your guidance and your healing forgiveness. Prepare us to receive your mercy and grace, and cleanse us of the ash of human failing, that we may embrace the words you speak - the words that lead to eternal life. Amen.

**SCRIPTURE** Joel 2:1-2, 12-17(NRSV)

2Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—2a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.

12Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; 13rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. 14Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering

for the Lord, your God? 15Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; 16gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. 17Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep. Let them say, “Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

**SCRIPTURE** Psalm 51:1-17 (NRSV)

God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. You desire truth in the inward being; \*therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right\* spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing\* spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God\* is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

**PRAYER**

God of dust and ash, you fashioned us from the dust of the earth, and to dust we shall return. May these ashes remind us of who we are and whose we are. Draw us back to you, O God, for you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Heal the hardness of our hearts, that we might be let go of those things that separate us from you. Receive our burdens, we pray. Amen.

**SCRIPTURE LESSON** Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 (NRSV)

‘Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 ‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

\*Concerning Fasting

16 ‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.\*

Concerning Treasures

19 ‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust\* consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust\* consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

**MEDITATION**  “Dust” From dust you came and to dust you shall return. There’s that smudge on your forehead…and we struggle with this lesson from Matthew – Jesus’ warning about practicing our piety before others. Is the cross I wear an outward piety easily wiped away with a tissue or is it a sign for the world that my life, all that I am, all that I have, all that I do, belongs to Christ?

 There is a false piety in today’s culture that is mocked for its outward show. True piety is found in the inward transformation of a life, the inner, secret heart that spends itself in love and praise of God and humble service to all of God’s created.

 Psalm 51 and Matthew 6 deal with the kinds of sacrifice that please God. There are many definitions of sin – anything that separates you from God creates this sense of brokenness. It’s like a pit of quicksand where you are stuck. The way out is not about a showy battle against evil but admitting that you are powerless. This admission of powerlessness and release is beautifully expressed in Psalm 51. The expression, “broken and contrite heart” calls to mind a child doing something wrong and wanting to make it right, even if it means letting go of something precious. That is the nature of surrender, confession and release.

 “Mommy, I’m stuck.” That’s the way the adventure began. Three-year-old Crystal came to her mother holding in one hand her great-grandmother’s vase. The other hand couldn’t be seen. It was stuck inside the vase.

 Crystal’s mother tried to move quickly without panicking, because the vase was valuable to her. Holding the vase and her little girl, she carried Crystal to the kitchen sink. She used warm soapy water to try to loosen the toddler’s hand which was indeed stuck. When soap didn’t work she reached for the butter. While greasing her child’s wrist like a cake pan, she asked the obvious “mother question.” “How in the world did you do this?” Crystal explained that she dropped a piece of candy into the vase to see if she could still see it when it was at the very bottom. She couldn’t. When she reached for her candy, she couldn’t get her hand back out.

 The more time went on, the more serious the whole situation became. Mother called grandmother to come over and help assess the situation. A neighbor suggested Vaseline. The apartment manager got the WD40. Still no luck. It seemed like the only way to get the child’s hand out was to break the heirloom.

 Grand-mom arrived with her calming presence and went over to Crystal, who was very upset and still very stuck. “Sweetheart,” she said gently, “Mommy says you reached in the vase for candy. Is that right?”

 “Mmm hmm,” the child whimpered, still breathless from crying.

 “Honey, tell Grand-mom the truth now. Do you still have a hold of that candy?”

 “Mmm hmm,” she sobbed.

The grand-mother patted her on the back to comfort her. “Let it go, child. Let it go.” The vase slipped off as smooth as silk.

 Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent when we remember that Jesus took forty days in the wilderness for prayer and contemplation. It is traditionally a time when we take a serious look at our lives. We look long and hard at ourselves and discover some things we don’t like. It’s time for some self-assessment and time for some change.

 Here at the beginning of Lent is Ash Wednesday. It’s the one day of the year when we remember that we came from dust and we will return to dust. We recognize that none of us is invincible; none of us immortal; we will all die. It is a day when we recognize that each day, each moment is a gift and not to be wasted. But we are. To one degree or another, we are all wasting the precious abundant life God has given us. We are stuck. At some point along the way we put ourselves somewhere we shouldn’t have been. Maybe we knew ahead of time that what we were doing was wrong. Maybe we stumbled into a situation in innocence. Whatever the case, we got ourselves stuck, and we don’t know how to get out.

 Can you remember when it happened? The habit, the addiction, the grudge, the gripping resentment? Do you remember when you let shame and guilt start running your life? Do you remember when you got stuck?

 It may not have seemed like much at the time. When the little girl first stuck her hand in the vase, it didn’t feel very big or heavy. But after an afternoon of carrying it around, and trying to be rid of it, it got to be quite a burden. Some of us are carrying around some burdens that are much larger than an old vase. They don’t take just one hand to hold. Our burdens are the big two-handed kind: the kind you carry in your arms and across your back and around your neck. The longer the burden is there the heavier it gets, the more difficult it is to move. We start looking down instead of up. We are burdened and we are stuck.

 There was a time when Jesus was burdened, carrying the burden of a heavy, wooden cross. His burden required both hands. His head was bowed low when he prayed that the cup might pass from him and yet he carried the cross. When Friday’s sorrow turned into resurrection joy our burdens were released. Freedom is ours to be received.

 So why do you still feel stuck? Why do you still let things control you? Why can’t you experience freedom in Christ? If you listen ever so closely, you can hear Jesus whispering like a loving Grand-mom, “Let it go, child. Let it go.” Whatever it is – that favorite sin, that pet worry, that sweet habit that has you stuck, let it go. If not, you may spend the rest of your life with a jar on your hand or a monkey on your back or a knot in your belly. Open your hands and let it go.

We all have burdens that we need to release and be released from if we are to follow Christ with abandon and joy.

For a few moments, allow yourself the freedom to give that burden to Christ.

Imagine holding it in your hand, tightly.

Tell God about the burden, how it is exhausting and agonizing and how you can’t remember what freedom feels like, what joy feels like.

Ask God, through Christ, to release it, to let it go.

Slowly opening your hand, let the burden go…

People always talk about giving something up for Lent. They give up chocolate or sweets or FaceBook…I’m suggesting you give up something more significant than that. I’m suggesting that you give up whatever it is that has a hold on you and keeps you from joyfully and abundantly following Jesus Christ. Give it up for Lent. “Let it go, child…let it go…”

In the Lenten journey that begins this day, locate your heart in the treasure that is Christ. May your journey take you to a place that rises up from dust and ash to the freedom that is Christ.

Lord, take the outward mark of ash inward and mark my heart again as yours. May my outward way so reflect your inward light that the world will not question whose I am. Amen.

**THE THANKSGIVING OVER THE ASHES**

Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth. Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence, so that we may remember that only by your gracious gift are we given everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Savior. **Amen.**

**THE IMPOSITION OF ASHES OR ANOINTING WITH OIL**

***“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return”***

(You may come as the Spirit leads to receive ashes or oil. After receiving, you may kneel at the altar for a time of private prayer or you may return to your seat.)

**CONFESSION AND PARDON** (After receiving the ashes or oil)

Have mercy, O God, have mercy on us. We have many treasures on earth that we hold too dearly that we withhold from others in need. When we sin against neighbor, condone injustice, and quarrel with one another, we sin against you. Forgive us, we pray, for we are broken in spirit. Do not see us for our faults, and do not go away from us. Keep us always in your presence so that we may be restored to the joy of your salvation. Sustain in us a willing spirit to treasure what you desire; to let go of our burdens; then our hearts will be opened in joy and gladness. Amen.

**BLESSING**

May this journey bring you to places of restoration and wholeness.

Go in peace in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.