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2/17/21—Ash Wednesday  
University Presbyterian Church  
Psalm 22:1-11; Isaiah 65:17-25

The season of Lent begins with a day of mourning. Every Ash Wednesday is best understood as a day of mourning. The ashes we place on our foreheads or on the backs of our hands serve as sign of our mortality. We begin Lent with a day of mourning. And that is especially true for this Ash Wednesday as we mourn the more than 400,000 Americans who have died from Covid-19. The number of deaths is staggering. This year we mourn the deaths of mothers and fathers, grandparents, grandchildren, husbands and wives, colleagues and friends. We mourn people we know who have died and we mourn those people who may be only names and numbers to us, but who were precious to other people and to our God. We grieve and we lament these loss of lives, and relationships, and talents. The staggering loss of life reminds us of the injustices of life, the brevity of life, the fragility of life, and of own mortality. We will each die.

Lent begins with this cry of grief over death. But the cry we utter to God is not only about the physical deaths of our bodies but also about the myriad of other kinds deaths we experience in this lifetime of ours. We call such deaths different names: sin, or brokenness, or alienation, or failures, or wrongdoings. And these deaths manifest themselves in many forms: in anger, in racism, in selfishness, in pride, in greed, in apathy and indifference, in addictions, in fear, in loss and heartache, in suffering and sorrow. These deaths rob us of the abundant life God intends for each of us and for all of us. These deaths bring harm to others, to our planet, to ourselves, and to our relationship with God. Ash Wednesday offers us the occasion to mourn

these other kinds of deaths that we and all of humanity endure. And we cry aloud to God in grief, in pain, and in need. Help us, we cry. Help us.

We are not the first people to cry to God in grief and in need. The Bible contains a record of ancient peoples who also knew both the physical and the emotional deaths that rob us of life. When the psalm writer cries out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” many of us can no doubt relate to those sentiments of abandonment and pain. “Do not be far from me,” beseeches the writer, “for trouble is near and there is no one to help.”

That is our cry this year as we endure a devastating pandemic that has robbed nearly 500,000 Americans of their lives. That is our cry this year as we grieve the many losses this last year has imposed upon us. That is our cry this year as we witness increasing unemployment and poverty, the rise of white supremacy, the breakdown of civility, and the ever growing animosity among citizens in our nation. That is our cry this year as we each struggle with our personal trials and tribulations, with our own brokenness and sin. “Do not be far from us for trouble is near.” As people covered with the ashes of many kinds of deaths, we cry to God to remember us in our creatureliness, to remember us, to help us, and to breathe new life into the ashyness of our lives.

And God answers our cry. Ash Wednesday is a day for mourning and a cry for help but it also marks the beginning of the season of Lent. We often think of Lent as our journey with Christ to the cross and to the tomb. But another way to think about Lent is Christ’s journey with *us* to the cross and to the tomb. Jesus enters our lives and stands in solidarity with us in our suffering. In Christ, God responds to our cries of grief and our call for help. In Christ, God shows us a path that leads away from death and toward life. In Christ, God breathes new life into the ashyness of our lives.

Long before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah offered words of hope that God would not abandon us to the forces of death. God says in this passage, “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth . . . No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be an infant that lives but a few days or an old person who does not live out a lifetime.” In this passage God promises to enter the ashyness of our lives--the heartbreaks, the struggles, the burdens, the brokenness—with the gift of life.

Tonight as we place the sign of ashes upon our bodies, we confess our pain and brokenness to God. Tonight we acknowledge our need for God to help us and save us from all the deaths we endure. Tonight we cry aloud to God who promises to join us in our journey. And we hope.