

Grace Episcopal Church
Ash Wednesday
Wednesday, February 22, 2023

Joel 2:1-2,12-17 – Psalm 103:8-14 (733) – II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 – Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Jefferson City, MO
Ash Wednesday RCL
Rev. William R. Nesbit, Jr.

Way back in 1988, from May to November, Yellowstone National Park burned.

The nation's first national park, still the most popular, went up in flames.

Small fires that had seemed easily manageable at the start, blazed out of control in the summer's severe drought.

Although firefighters and equipment had been in place from the beginning,

they were nearly helpless in the face of the conflagration, barely able to preserve the most historic buildings from annihilation.

Finally, in September, rain and snowstorms dampened the majority of the fires, so that by November they could be completely extinguished. The flames left behind what many visitors called a lunar landscape on earth, repainted in black and gray, with the charred spires of lodgepole pine rising from a carpet of ash. And thus it happened that in one summer, Yellowstone National Park was utterly destroyed, never to be the same again. Or so it seemed.

People spent the winter mourning over the destruction of the land, as well as, I will confess, over the loss of tourist revenue. Experts estimated how many decades it might take before the park's ecosystem,

over a third of which had been consumed by flames, would recover. Folks in coffee shops and bars debated how long it would take for heat-sterilized soil to be able to support life again, if ever.

And wildlife scientists questioned if animal populations in that area would ever revive.

One of the lessons we learned from the Yellowstone fire is that we humans are not nearly as smart as we think we are. We're sure we have the answers; we know exactly how things ought to be. And we spend our lives, – we waste our lives – fighting for control, making the rules, being in charge. Yet our fighting for being in charge generally makes a mess of things. If not for a long-standing human policy of putting out all park fires immediately – because fires are “bad” – then the fire of 1988 would not have been nearly as destructive. This apparent paradox holds just as true in our own lives as it does in the forest.

We want to make the rules; we want to do things our way. But in the process we assume we know better than God; we reject obedience to God, and that rejection leads to our destruction.

The ashes we will wear today come from the burned palms of Palm Sunday. You remember the story of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, surrounded by crowds waving palm branches and laying them in his path as they hailed him as king and Messiah, as David returned.

Remember also that it is the same crowd that, not that much later when Jesus disappoints them, cries out to Pilate, "Crucify him, crucify him!"

And so you might say that these palm ashes are the *ashes* of that disappointment, of Jesus failing to meet their expectations.

These are the ashes of our disappointments as well.

These are the ashes of all of our hopes and dreams that God does not fulfill as we would wish, the ashes of our dreams of how the world *should* work, the ashes of the people we wish God had made us, the ones that are taller, shorter, richer, thinner, prettier, smarter

– you fill in the blank.

Today we put ashes on our foreheads
as a twofold sign and symbol.

First they are a symbol of our recognition
that all too often we let *our* ideas of what should be,
keep us from what God has in mind for us.

In this act, we come together to confess
that we have followed our own wills rather than God's will.

We acknowledge that we are merely the creation,
not the creator,
that our knowledge is limited and transient.

That dust we are, and to dust we shall return.

But these ashes are also, paradoxically, a symbol of hope
and a sign of our repentance and rededication.

Those desires that hold us apart from God's will
we choose to burn, to wear as ashes.

We surrender ourselves to God,
admitting that we are wrong.

And with our return to obedience,

God leads us into a new life. A life of Grace.

What happened to Yellowstone?

With the next year's spring rains came wildflowers blooming
in sunlight that had never before reached them.

With the clearing of old timber, deadfall, and underbrush came
new tree seedlings, whose sprouting was actually triggered by
the heat of the fire.

With new open spaces for grasses and meadows came food and
habitat for more and different animals.

By the next year Yellowstone was clearly healing;
within five years the ecosystem was actually healthier than it
had been before the fire.

God does not promise us a life free of fires,
nor is that what we should seek.

What God offers us is the promise
that, if we surrender our will,
those fires can become the refiner's fire
that will purify and strengthen us.

God will, through the saving action of Jesus Christ
and the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit,
draw us through those flames;
and lift us out of the ashes of our desires,
into the new life of grace.

And we will find springing forth around us,
in ways that were previously unimaginable,
the wild abundance of God.

Amen.