

Ash Wednesday
February 18, 2026
Isaiah 58:1-2, 9-12 & 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:2
The Path to Repair and Restoration: Repentance

Our first scripture this evening is from the prophet Isaiah. We heard a portion of this scripture a few weeks ago. It is a powerful address that contrasts empty religious ritual and true worship that pleases God. It primarily focuses on the heart behind spiritual disciplines like fasting and Sabbath-keeping, emphasizing that outward piety is meaningless if it isn't accompanied by social justice and compassion. Hear now these words from Isaiah 58 which begin with God commanding the prophet to "cry aloud" and expose the sins of the people, and is followed by promises of restoration if the people engage in true spiritual practices

Isaiah 58: 1-2

Shout out; do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they want God on their side.

Isaiah 58: 9-11 The promise of blessings and restorations if true worship is observed. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am." If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

The Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your needs in parched places and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Our second scripture passage this evening is from 2 Corinthians. The Apostle Paul is writing to a church who is struggling. While we don't know all the specifics of the church politics, it appears that different factions had arisen. How do we live out our call to be Christ's representatives here on earth, when we are sinful people, selfishly clinging to the belief that our way is the right way or the only way? Listen with me for these words from God from 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:2.

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God. For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As we work together with him, we entreat you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” Look, now is the acceptable time; look, now is the day of salvation! **The Word of God for the People of God.**

We have a three actor play in this passage from 2 Corinthians. There is God. There is Christ. There is us. We entreat you – that is we beg you - on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God. Nothing like jumping right in with the theological take-home message in the first line. Paul commands us to be reconciled to God. We are to return to God, no longer estranged – no longer separated. How do we do that exactly? Well as Paul says it is through Christ. “For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

I sometimes struggle reading the letters from Paul – what is he exactly saying? In those cases, I often turn to *The Message*, a faithful rendering of scripture into contemporary English by pastor and scholar Eugene Peterson. *The Message* says “God has given us the task of telling everyone what he is doing. We’re Christ’s representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God’s work of making things right between them. We’re speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; he’s already a friend with you. How, you ask? In Christ. God put the wrong on him who never did anything wrong, so we could be put right with God.”

I find that translation helpful – become friends with God through Christ. Christ is the agent - the means by which we are put right with God, but God has also given us a task as Christ’s ambassadors or representatives … God uses us to persuade people to drop their differences and enter into God’s work of making things right between them. Christ is the one who reconciles us to God and we are tasked with being agents of reconciliation with others.

How do we live out our call to be Christ’s representatives – Christ’s ambassadors - here on earth, when we are sinful people, selfishly clinging to the belief that our way is the right way or the only way? This sinfulness breaches our ability to be in relationship with God. In this passage, we hear Paul’s call to repent, so our relationship with God can be restored - reconciled. We hear that it is through Christ that we are reconciled to God. And we hear Paul tell us what community looks like when we realize it is not about power and getting our way, but instead serving with our eyes focused on God’s love.

Paul goes on to say that his ministry – the church in Corinth - is putting obstacles in the way of reconciliation. Some translations use the word “stumbling block” or “offenses,” but I like the term “obstacles” because it makes me face the hard reality that sometimes in my life I swerve to avoid or even go the other way when there is an obstacle in the road. My failure to be in right relationship with God or with others is because I perceive an obstacle in the path that is too difficult for me confront. Too difficult for me to conquer… not just a rock that makes me

stumble, but a boulder or even a mountain range that in mind is impenetrable. Repent? More likely pull up the map on my phone and find another way.

Repentance is a fundamental practice of the Christian faith. While the scriptures are full of admonitions to repent, they are less clear on how exactly to repent. One aspect that is a consistent theme however, is that repentance consists of two aspects, turning away from that which is a breach in the relationship between one and another or one and God and turning toward God so that one can engage in new thoughts or behaviors to repair or restore the breach. I like the way the reformed theologian John Calvin says it—repentance has two faces—death of a corrupt sinful nature and new life in the Spirit of God. Departing from ourselves, we turn to God, and having taken off our former mind, we put on a new mind. Repentance is the conversion by which our old sinful self **dies** and a new life **arises**.

Lent gives us the opportunity each year to confront the places in our life that need to die off so that we can be reconciled to God and to each other. I think about in my own life the obstacles that interfere with my relationship with God—the boulders of ego and pride and illusion of control. That surely Christ's death on the cross was for the "other people." Nope. That boulder—that obstacle—needs to be plowed through and blown up. Christ's death on the cross was to reconcile me—mortal, sinful, Lisa to God.

This was the issue the prophet Isaiah was addressing as well. The people complained that they were fasting and sacrificing themselves, yet God was not answering their prayers. God revealed that while they were "fasting," they were still pursuing their own pleasures, exploiting their workers, and engaging in "strife and debate". Their "fast" was merely a physical act of bowing their heads like a reed, lacking any internal change or repentance. God redefines fasting as a commitment to justice and mercy rather than just abstaining from food. True fasting involves "loosing the bonds of wickedness," "undoing heavy burdens," and "letting the oppressed go free". It requires sharing bread with the hungry, providing shelter for the homeless, and clothing the naked. It is both the faces of repentance—the turning away from that which is a breach in the relationship and turning toward God so that one can repair or restore the breach and rebuild relationships. As the prophet Isaiah says:

The Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your needs in parched places and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Lent gives us the opportunity each year to confront the places in our life that need to die off so that we can be reconciled to God and to each other. So we can begin a journey of repair and restoration. So where do we start... We begin on Ash Wednesday with a public act of confession. We acknowledge that we—every one of us—have sinned and fallen short of the

glory of God. We publically acknowledge this and stand with each before God, acutely aware of our mortality.

Like baptism and the Lord's Supper, being marked with ashes is done within our community – not in the privacy of our homes, not hidden away, but standing side by side with the people we worship, study, and fellowship with. The people we see at the grocery store, on the golf course, at the traffic light when we are in hurry. We are marked as individuals, but as we face each other, marked with the dust of mortality, we recognize that we are a church community made up of humans, muddling our way through life. We grieve with each other, as we recognize that our sinfulness grieves God as we fail to live as siblings in Christ. We are all humans in need of forgiveness and grace. The ashes we wear on our Lenten journey symbolize the dust and broken debris of our lives, as well as the reality that eventually each of us will die. It is the first step in the process of healing – of being restored to right relationship.

Throughout Lent this year we will walk through various steps we can take to repair and restore our world using the lectionary passages for the Lenten season. This Sunday, we will consider what it means to be obedient to God's word. In subsequent weeks we will consider themes of trusting in God's path, receiving grace, discernment in decision making, being unbound from the world's priorities, and remembering Christ's action. On Easter Sunday, April 5 we will celebrate Christ's resurrection – the ultimate act of repair and restoration. We take the first step on the path this evening, repenting and remembering our mortality, as we begin our reorientation. Reorienting our life to become a new creation starts by recognizing the obstacles in our path, the ones we put in the way and the ones put in our way. Let this Lenten season be a time for removing the obstacles in our path to healing and wholeness, obstacles that keep us separated from God and from each other. Amen.