



Brookline Community Church

February 17, 2021

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[You may want to have [this instrumental version of *Were You There?*](#) to help you settle yourself for this reflection.]

O God, my heart has been stained with the sin of this world;
my spirit is weary and my joy has grown dim.

With the psalmist I pray:

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.

Joel 2:1-2

Blow 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—
a 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.

We have been living for almost a year in perpetual Ash Wednesday. The Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us, day by day, breath by breath, that dust we are and to dust we shall return. We hear an ambulance shriek by and we know. We hear someone cough and we remember. We see someone in the grocery with their mask under their nose and we flinch. We cannot be together tonight, to feel the grit of the ashes placed on our foreheads. Because we have been feeling the grit of those ashes for a year in our hearts.

Joel 2:15-16

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
gather 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.

We would love to call a solemn assembly, gather the people. But we are spread like ashes on the wind, from one end of the world to the other. Even when we are right next door to each other, when your kids slide down the hill into my yard, we are so far apart.

So this Ash Wednesday is more personal than it should be, where our awareness of others, comes to us through a computer or a television screen. Let the reality of this year be part of your ritual. Using water or lotion or nothing but your fingertips, give yourself a moment to hear the trumpets on Zion and know this Ash Wednesday for what it is.

Take a deep breath for the world, inhaling sorrows you know from the news and exhaling love and hope and blessing. *Pause.*

Take a second deep breath for those who are ill, in despair or fearful now, inhaling the painful stories you know are out there, then exhaling love and hope and blessing. *Pause.*

Take a third deep breath for those dear to you, inhaling their needs, losses, anxieties and exhaling love, hope and blessing. *Pause.*

Now you are only yourself. Just you, God's beloved child. Mark a cross on your forehead or the back of your hand, and say, "I am human dust, and the image of God. God loves me." *Pause.*

Joel 2:12

Yet even now, says the Lord,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
rend your hearts and not your clothing.

Ash Wednesday is for re-mem-bering, re-noticing our true situation, in the world and before God. From dust we came and to dust we shall return. Like all of God's creation, like everything that depends on God's creation, like everything, we need to return to the ground from whence we've come. The words "human" and "humus" have the same root which means the dirt, the dust. And so does the world "humility." After a year of pandemic, we know that truth in a new way.

Joel 2:13

Return to the Lord, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.

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