

Ash Wednesday – You Are Still God
Deuteronomy 8:2-10
February 14, 2024
Pastor Bethany Nelson

Tonight we gather for Ash Wednesday, a day which marks the beginning of Lent and offers us an opportunity to reflect on some of what makes us human: our brokenness, our wandering and searching, even our mortality. And we do so while wrapped in the promises of Christ's redeeming love.

It's a safe space, for us to reflect on the places in our life that are hurting or broken, the ways we might feel alone or lost, and the areas in life that make us worried or afraid. In this space, wrapped in God's love, we're encouraged to explore safely - trusting that God's got us, and will never let us go.

Just a few minutes ago, we heard Pastor Tami read from Deuteronomy. Ancient tradition says these were words spoken by Moses to his people. In the first chapters of Deuteronomy, Moses describes what life and relationship with God look like.

Some of Moses' words will sound familiar to you. Just prior to what we heard read tonight, in a section famously called the *Shema* (which is the first word of these important words), Moses tells us how to follow God. It begins: *Shema Y'israel*, or:

Hear, O Israel, The Lord is God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Picking up where we read tonight, we hear this further explained:

Remember the long road on which the LORD your God led you during these forty years in the desert... testing you to find out what was in your heart: whether you would keep his commandments or not. God humbled you by making you hungry and then feeding you the manna ... so God could teach you that people don't live on bread alone...

[So] Keep the commandments of the LORD your God... because the LORD your God is bringing you to a wonderful land... you won't lack a thing there... You will eat, you will be satisfied, and you will bless the LORD your God in the wonderful land that God's given you.

These verses were written thousands of years ago, to a people who lived across the world, in a life entirely different than our own. And yet, they continue to speak directly to our hearts and circumstance, offering direction for how we are to live.

We're reminded that in our spaces of wilderness and desert, God is with us, calling us to remain faithful to God's commandments. Reminding us that it is so often in the hard seasons, in the times when we feel we've lost our way, that new life begins. In this place, God is at work, guiding us to a blessed and wonderful land God's created.

Many years ago, when I had finished seminary and passed all my board interviews - I was in a season of wandering. I was waiting for God to reveal the next step for me on my journey to (finally) being a pastor. But door after door seemed to close in front of me. I found myself discouraged and alone. Wondering why God would call me to this place, just to leave me.

I had directed my whole life toward following this call God placed on my heart. And now? Instead of a promised land, I found a desert - I had no job, no home, and then - just to make matters worse, my car died. I felt alone and broken.

But just as God always does in these seasons, I also found a new invitation to trust that God was with me, even if I was being led through the wilderness of a desert, with no idea of where I was headed. God knew. God worked in my heart to prepare me for what was next, encouraging me to trust in God like I'd never done before. Calling me to remain faithful to God's commandments, even when life was hard. And in that season of pain and brokenness, God was at work. Doing the very thing God is best at — bringing life from the ashes. Eventually, I found my footing — along with a new-to-me car, a home, and a wonderful church to serve. But it was only after this time of searching and relying on God that I was ready for the places God had for me. Though I couldn't see it at the time, God used that season of wandering in the desert to teach me and help me grow. Tonight, more than a decade later, I'm grateful for that time, because it led me to the life I know now: with my spouse, my children, and eventually - with you. A fuller life than I could ever have imagined.

Are you in a season of wandering and waiting? Have you places of brokenness or in need of renewal? Tonight, I encourage you, as we begin Lent, to receive God's invitation to walk, trusting God is with you, guiding you through the desert toward a new and renewed life. Because I believe, that God is at work in you, too, right now in this moment.

In many ways, the life God calls us to is simple. We're to love God with our whole hearts, souls, and strength. It's in the living out of these commandments that things get tricky. Because we're to do all of this, not only when life is simple, but also when life is hard. And when we do, God can use these seasons of wilderness and desert time to help us grow in our trust and love of God, bringing us to a place of healing and new life.

In the passages we heard tonight, God's people are in the middle of the wilderness. They too, were struggling and searching. They had left their former life behind, trusting in God. But they could not see that promised land to which they were headed. It was painful and hard. But still, they heard God's invitation to trust and to follow. And so they did. And along the way, they learned, they messed up, they grieved, and they held on with hope.

Just as Moses and his people were led by God, so too is God with us in our seasons and places of wilderness. God guides, encourages, and continues to remind us of who we are, and who we are called to be.

Moses said to then, *"Remember how the Lord led you all the way in the wilderness."*

Remember.

Remember that when you are afraid.

When you fall down, wander, or run off.

Remember when you fail to love your neighbor.

When you say unkind things, or let fear or anger take control.

Remember when you are confused and searching.

When you wonder if you'll ever find the way to go.

Remember.

In all those times and places of fear and scarcity, of worry and pain.

In all those places where nothing seems to go right and your hope mingles with grief.

Remember.

Because there, God was — and is — with you,

leading you through the wilderness, bringing you home.

Tonight we recognize the seasons of desert and wilderness in our lives. Maybe yours, like mine, was long ago. And maybe you're in the middle of one now. Maybe you have lost your way, or feel far from the promised land.

Hear God's promise to accompany you in this place, God's invitation to be faithful along every spot along your journey. Trusting that even now, God is leading you through the desert, through the wilderness, and toward the cross and empty tomb.

One way we mark this journey, is by receiving ashes upon our foreheads. These ashes are crumbly and messy, like so many areas of our life. Ashes remind us of death and barren places, easily blown away or absorbed by the earth.

But they also can remind us that God creates beautiful things from dirt and ash, that from them new life begins. Just as God first formed and shaped humanity from the dirt of the earth, so too, does God form and shape you, giving you new life.

As you receive ashes tonight, you'll hear these words:

Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Remember out of dust you have been created, shaped and formed by God. And one day, you will return to the earth, and to the home of God. But for now? Now you bare the signs of God's creating, redeeming, faithful presence in your life and our world.

Because it is with dirt and darkness that all of creation finds life. Plants take root. Stars are formed. Resurrection begins.

And you sprout out of dirt, ashes, and darkness into an abundant life. Through the wilderness and desert, God remains faithful – setting you to sprout, to be made new, and to rise.

Friends, as we begin this season of lent – may you remember what good and incredible things our God can do with dust. May you rest in the comfort of God's presence, trusting that God is guiding you along the way. Let us pray:

Lord, You have created us from dirt and clay. You've breathed into us your breath of life. You've sustained us throughout the wilderness and on every journey, calling us to follow you. We pray this Lenten season that You will continue to shape and mold us to Your image. You'll continue to breath life into us, guiding us along this, and every journey. In the name of your Son, our Savior, Brother, and Lord we pray: Amen.