

**SERMON**  
“The Fast We Choose”  
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Ash Wednesday  
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St. John’s Chapel UCC

Isaiah 58: 1-12

“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 delight to draw near to God. “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in a sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to Yahweh?

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of Yahweh shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and Yahweh 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. Yahweh 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.

## SERMON

“For some people,” says Anne Lamott, “[Lent] is about fasting, to symbolize both solidarity with the hungry and the hunger for God. I, on the other hand, am not heavily into fasting; the thought of missing even a single meal sends me running in search of Ben and Jerry’s Mint Oreo!”<sup>1</sup>

The 58<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Isaiah, which is one of the prescribed readings for Ash Wednesday, is heavy into explaining for us the appropriate and inappropriate ways to fast. So apparently, whoever put together the lectionary felt Ash Wednesday, the doorway to Lent, has something to do with fasting. UCC’s *Book of Worship* even says “Lent, the **forty** days of fasting (not counting Sundays), begins with the imposition of the ashes on the foreheads of the faithful.”<sup>2</sup>

We mark ourselves with ashes this evening as a reminder of life’s frailty, and in remembering, enter into the mourning from which we trust God can work the miraculous. From the **ashes of death** we trust God can rise up something better. People of antiquity fasted for very similar reasons. They fasted especially during mourning. They sprinkled ashes over each other and they adorned themselves with sackcloth to express their despair and grief. This they did not just as a means of mourning, but as an act of humbling themselves, so that God might take notice and lift them up.

One gets the sense that the people are suffering from despair or sadness in Isaiah, and God is not paying them any mind. They are doing all the right stuff. They are fasting, wearing sackcloth and lying in ashes—but are left to feel that God has abandoned them. They shout to God, “Why do we fast, but You do not see? Why humble ourselves, when You do not notice?” (Isaiah 58: 3a) It is sort of like us saying, “God I have tried to do all the right stuff. I’ve prayed

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, “Ashes,” p. 91.

<sup>2</sup> *Book of Worship, United Church of Christ*, p.

and prayed. I go to church every Sunday, even Sunday School. I've even joined pastor's Spiritual Development group, but You still seem indifferent to my pain."

Anne Lamott was into that kind of mindset the day she wanted to get her son, Sam, interested in Ash Wednesday. She wanted the two of them to do all the right stuff in observance of the day. What she got was Sam up a tree shouting down that he couldn't decide whether to hang himself or jump, even after she pointed out nicely that he was only five feet from the ground.

The morning had started off nice enough with Anne making Sam cocoa for breakfast and giving him a rousing explanation of Ash Wednesday. She enlightened her son on how we daub our foreheads with ashes to remind us of how much we miss and celebrate those who have already died and of our own impending death. How we mark ourselves with ashes to show that we trust in the miraculous change God can work with those ashes. How God can jog us awake, move us toward greater attention, and openness, and love.

"Sam listened very politely to my little talk," says Anne. "Then when he thought I wasn't looking, he turned on the TV. I made him turn it off. I explained that in honor of Ash Wednesday we were not watching cartoons that morning. I told him he could draw if he wanted. I got myself a cup of coffee and started looking at a book of photographs that someone had sent. One in particular caught my eye immediately. It was of a large Mennonite family, shot in black and white—a husband and wife and their fifteen children gathered around a highly polished oval table, their faces clearly, eerily reflected in the wood. They looked surreal and serious; you saw in those long grave faces the echoes of the Last Supper. I wanted to show the photograph to Sam. But abruptly, hideously, Alvin and the chipmunks were singing "Achy Breaky Heart" in their nasally, demon-filled way—on the TV that Sam had turned on again.

At that point, Anne lost it. She thought she might smash things. Instead, she began shouting at the top of her lungs. She even used bad words, insulting words, as she pointed out they would be getting rid of that blanky, blank TV. She grabbed him by his arm and drug him in the direction of his room where he spent the next ten minutes crying bitter tears.

Anne felt awful about attacking her child. It was for her, the worst; to lose it and shout loudly at a fifty-pound being with huge trusting brown eyes. It was like slapping E.T.

Therefore, she did what she believes all good parents do. She calmed down enough to go apologize, and beg for his forgiveness while simultaneously expressing a deep concern about his disappointing character. He told her she was the meanest person on earth next to Darth Vader.

She continued to chastise herself while washing breakfast dishes, but then it was time for school. Anne went to get her son and couldn't find him. She looked everywhere in the house, in closets, under beds, and finally heard him shouting from the branches of their tree.

After finally coaxing him down and dropping him off at school, Anne continued to feel terrible. She went for several walks, and thought about being the meanest mother in the world. As she walked and thought, she got sadder. Then she got to thinking about the ashes of the dead.

She thought about the ashes she had held of two people she adored—her dad's and her friend, Pammy's. She was twenty-five when she had poured her father's ashes into the water near Angel Island. When she opened the box of ashes, she thought they would be nice and soft and, well, ashy, like the ones with which they anoint your forehead on Ash Wednesday. But they were the grittiest of elements, like not very good landscaping pebbles. As if they were made of bones or something.

Years later she tossed a handful of Pammy's ashes into the water, way out past the Golden Gate Bridge during the day, with her husband and family. "This time," she says, "I was

able to see, because it was daytime and I was sober, the deeply contradictory nature of ashes—that they are both so heavy and so light. They’re impossible to let go of entirely. They stick to things, to your fingers, your sweater. I licked my friend’s ashes off my hand, to taste her, to taste what was left after all that was clean and alive had been consumed...burned away. We tried to strew them off the side of the boat romantically, with seals barking from the rocks on shore, under a true-blue-sky, but they would not cooperate. It’s frustrating if you are hoping to have a happy ending, or at least a little closure, a movie moment when you toss them into the air and they flutter and disperse. They don’t. They cling. They haunt. They get in your hair, in your eyes, in your clothes.”

“By the time I reached into the box of Pammy’s ashes,” Anne reports, “I had had Sam, so I was able to tolerate a bit more mystery and lack of order. That’s one of the gifts kids give you, because after you have a child, things come out much less orderly and rational than they did before. They also help you see that you are as mad as a hatter, capable of violence just because Alvin and the Chipmunks are singing when you are trying to have a nice spiritual moment thinking about ashes.”

“Look,” says Isaiah the mouthpiece of God, “You fast, lie in sackcloth and ashes, and so forth and so on, only to quarrel and to fight. Such fasting as you do it will not make your voice heard on high.”

By the time Anne held Pammy’s ashes in her hand, she almost liked the way they grounded her in all the sadness and mysteriousness. She could find comfort in that. There’s a kind of sweetness and attention you can finally pay to the tiniest grains of life after you’ve run your hand through the ashes of someone you loved. Death somehow opens us to what is truly important about life.

And getting uptight and upset about doing all the right stuff, the fasting, the wearing of sackcloth or lying in ashes—does not end up at the top of the list. And getting even more uptight and upset that others will not do *your* right stuff is ludicrous.

Sam went home after school with a friend and then off to dinner with his Big Brother, Brian, a volunteer for the well-known mentoring program, as he does every Wednesday. Anne went to her church, where eight women gathered, and dipped their own fingers in ashes and daubed them on their own foreheads.

When she got home, Sam was already asleep. Brian had put him to bed. Anne wanted to wake him up and tell him that it was OK that he didn't cooperate with her all the time—that ashes don't, why should little boys? But she didn't.

Come morning he was in her bed when she woke. Anne watched him sleep and thought again about the photo of the Mennonites, of the fieriness of their bond, and their fragile reflection in the oval table that a wind could so easily blow away.

“More than anything else on earth,” she thought, “I do not want Sam ever to blow away, but you know what? He will. His ashes will stick to the fingers of someone who loves him.”<sup>3</sup> Maybe his ashes will blow that person into a place where Pammy's blew me—

- a place where things are not tacked down so neatly,
- a place where people do not sweat the small stuff,
- a place where the fast we choose is to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to share our bread with the hungry,
- a place removed from pointing, accusing fingers,
- and a place where love for all...rules supreme.

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<sup>3</sup> Lamott, p.

“While she lay there deep in her thoughts, [Sam] called out, ‘Mom.’ ‘Yes,’ Anne whispered, “here I am,” and he slung his arms toward the sound of her voice and out across her shoulders.”<sup>4</sup>

Then they shall call, and Yahweh will answer; you shall call help, and God will say, “Here I am.” Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Lamott, p.98.