

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:1-2,12-17

Psalm 103:8-14

2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Is it weird that I am
over the moon,
head over heels happy
that today is Ash Wednesday?

That's weird, right?
Or do you feel the same way?

Because let's face it:
Ash Wednesday is a lot of things.
It is meaningful.
It is beautiful.
It is somber,
and holy,
and true.

But Ash Wednesday is not known
for being a day that makes us "happy."

However, if you, like me,
are happy to be here tonight,
it is probably because you also remember
that the last thing we did on this campus
before our lives were forever turned upside down . . .
was Ash Wednesday of 2020.

Now, of course, we've been back in this place
worshipping in person
in one form or another
for almost a year now
since Easter of 2021,
but it hasn't quite felt the same
until recently.

There is something about tonight
that makes it all feel
like things are finally coming
full circle.

It sounds absurd,
but this, my friends,
is a happy Ash Wednesday.

* * *

Perhaps that shouldn't be such a surprise
because part of what this day tells us—
part of what the whole Christian faith tells us—
is that we serve an absurd God
who makes absurd promises
and calls us to do and to believe in absurd things.

Do you know what that word “absurd” actually means?

It comes from Latin.
It's a musical term
that literally means
“out of tune.”

Sometimes, you hear something,
and it sounds just right.
It all fits together
and makes perfect sense.

Other times, you hear something,
and it's off;
it sounds a little wrong,
like it's not really supposed to be that way.

That is what it means
when something is “absurd.”

You want to talk about absurd?
Last year's Ash Wednesday was absurd.
Do you remember?

We were still worshipping entirely online,
but by God, I was determined
you all were going to get your ashes.

So we planned it all out.
We had one of our
“drive-thru Communion,”
(which was absurd.)

And with your “drive-thru Communion”
we gave you little tiny bags of ashes

to put on your heads
while watching the pre-recorded service
on your TV or computer at home,
(which was absurd.)

Of course, we had to order
those little baggies ahead of time,
and our Parish Administrator Emily asked,
“They don’t make Ziplock bags that small, do they?”
to which I said, “Oh yes. They sure do,”
to which she asked, “Well whatever for?”
to which I said, “Drugs, Emily. People use them to sell drugs,”
which meant your parish administrator and your priest
then had to Google “How to buy drug baggies online,”
(which was absurd.)

And don’t even get me started
on how we had to make the extra ashes
to have enough for those baggies,
because, you see, the ashes for Ash Wednesday
are always made from the dried up palm branches
from the previous year’s Palm Sunday,
but there had not *been* a previous Palm Sunday.

So what did I do?
I stole palm branches
from all over Tift County
(which was absurd.)

And I don’t know if you know *this*,
but palm branches usually grow in the desert,
which means palm branches retain water,
which means palm branches do not easily burn
unless they have been drying out for a year,
which means there I was on Ash Wednesday
trying to dry out those palm branches
by shoving them into the church microwave
(which was absurd.)

When I finally got them dry enough
to burn them under the Parish Hall portico
wouldn’t you know it,
a mighty gust of wind blew through,
and 80% of those ashes went flying north
and settled, I like to believe,
somewhere in vicinity of Dooly County,
(which was absurd.)

Thank God it was already a day of repentance
because I said many things in that moment
for which I would indeed need to repent.

But the thing I said most bitingly
through gritted teeth
and utter frustration was this:

“WHY are we doing this?

This. Is. STUPID.

This. Is. *ABSURD*.”

**But you know what?
We did it because it mattered.**

We did it because we needed God;
and we needed each other;
and we needed to be reminded
that we may be dust,
but we are God’s dust,
and because we are God’s dust,
we are going to be okay.

That, my friends, is called hope,
and hope—by its very nature—
is always absurd.

* * *

You have come here tonight
because you are looking for something.

You are not looking for half-truths
or easy answers.

You are looking for the hope and absurdity of God,
and here you will find it.

For tonight is the night
when we are told
that as bad as we are,

“the Lord is full of compassion and mercy,
slow to anger and of great kindness.” (Psalm 103:8)

Tonight is the night
when Jesus tells us
it’s not about treasures and trophies
because one day you are going to die,
and the treasures and trophies you have collected
won’t mean squat,
but the love of God will. (Matthew 6:19-21)

Tonight is the night
when we proclaim
that we are unknown, yet well known,
dying, yet alive,
punished, yet not killed,
sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,
poor, yet making many rich,
having nothing, yet possessing everything. (2 Corinthians 6:9-10)

What is absurd is *not* that we live in a world
full of violence, and viruses, and Vladimir Putins.
That’s all par for the course.
That’s all just part of our sinful, sorry, predictable nature.

No, this is what’s absurd:

What is absurd is that God loves us.
What is absurd is that God forgives us.
What is absurd is that God is the God
of second and third and eight billionth chances,
and nothing—not even our death—
can separate us from the mercy he chooses to heap on us
when we give our broken hearts to him. (Psalm 51:18)

So yeah . . . you know what?
This is a happy Ash Wednesday.

Not just because
we’re not shoving palm branches into microwaves
and dealing out ashes in little plastic bags.

Not even because
it feels like the pandemic is finally behind us
and God has brought us full circle
together again.

No, my friends, this is a happy Ash Wednesday
because against all reason,
God loves us.

Maybe that's all any of us
have been looking for anyway.

Amen.