

March 6, 2019 ~ Ash Wednesday Service

## Invited to Our Knees

Annette Hill Briggs

Psalm 51

### Prelude

### Call to Worship

One: Almighty God does not desire the death of sinners, but rather that we turn from our wickedness and live.

**All: Therefore, we begin this Lenten season in contrition and repentance, telling ourselves the truth about the sin in our own hearts.**

One: God has come to us in Christ Jesus, that we might live faithfully all our days, and at the last enter God's own eternal joy.

**All: Thanks be to God! Let us bring our whole selves to this worship now.**  
**Amen.** ©      © adapted, from UCC Book of Worship

Hymn ~ Open My Eyes, That I May See

### Opening Meditation

All those days you felt like dust,  
like dirt,  
as if all you had to do  
was turn your face toward the wind  
and be scattered to the four corners  
or swept away by the smallest breath  
as insubstantial—  
did you not know  
what the Holy One  
can do  
with dust?

This is the day  
we freely say  
we are scorched.

This is the hour  
we are marked  
by what has made it through the burning.

This is the moment we ask for the blessing  
that lives within the ancient ashes,  
that makes its home inside the soil of this sacred earth.

So let us be marked not for sorrow.  
And let us be marked not for shame.  
Let us be marked not for false humility  
or for thinking we are less than we are  
but for claiming what God can do  
within the dust,  
within the dirt,  
within the stuff  
of which the world is made  
and the stars that blaze in our bones  
and the galaxies that spiral  
inside the smudge we bear. ©

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## **Silent Reflection**

### **Hymn ~ Refiner's Fire**

### **Biblical Witness ~ Psalm 51**

*<sup>1</sup>Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.*

*<sup>2</sup>Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.*

*<sup>3</sup>For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.*

*<sup>4</sup>Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so  
that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.*

*<sup>5</sup>Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.*

*<sup>6</sup>You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*

*<sup>7</sup>Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*

<sup>8</sup> *Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.*  
<sup>9</sup> *Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.*  
<sup>10</sup> *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.*  
<sup>11</sup> *Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.*  
<sup>12</sup> *Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.*  
<sup>13</sup> *Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.*  
<sup>14</sup> *Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.*  
<sup>15</sup> *O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.*  
<sup>16</sup> *For you have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.*  
<sup>17</sup> *The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

### **Sermon** ~ Pastor Annette ~ *“Invited to Our Knees”*

This Psalm is a prayer, the prayer of David on his knees, begging forgiveness for the worst a human can do: rape; conspiracy; murder; military misconduct resulting in the death of his soldiers; lying under oath. Even then, he's only on his knees because he got caught. Confession after the fact – which, it turns out, suits God well enough. As we will read on Sunday, Jesus says not everyone sees the light even then.

Ash Wednesday, when we present ourselves to the altar (in far fewer numbers than we present ourselves to the Easter feast), as David presented himself to the prophet Nathan, to hear, “God knows all of it! You are the one who showed the world you did not care what God wanted!” (2 Samuel 12:13) As David was on his knees, Ash Wednesday invites **us** to **ours**, to bend ourselves in the direction of the truth – the truth being: we are over our heads in sin. Our sin against other people; other people's sin against us; the systemic sin of a culture driven by greed and indifference to the suffering our greed inflicts upon other human beings.

Just like David. If not in severity, surely in quantity. Nathan gives example upon example of how David's sin will hang like stones around not only his own neck, but also around the necks of his sons and his daughters too. *Your family will know NO peace.* We aren't given to know where David's heart was. But however true his contrition, his words are the right ones.

We have plenty of room to do our heart work, because we don't have to figure what to say. Just repeat after him: <sup>3</sup> *my sin is ever before me.* <sup>4</sup> *Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.* <sup>5</sup> *Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived*

*me. <sup>6</sup>You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.  
<sup>7</sup>Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*

Even if we haven't been as bad as him, we have not been as good as we could and should have been. Given the grace of God to us, individually and as a race, we have been dis-grace-ful. And it shows – in the poverty of our devotion; in the suffering of the world. Dis-grace-ful. And yet, God is God, so that we are also beloved. Unshakably so. For all the trouble we cause, no less loved.

So, ashes. Ashes are what's left when live things get burned up. The evidence of death and destruction smeared upon our heads to remind us of these two things. One: We have done dis-grace-fully to ourselves, to one another, and to the planet. Two: God loves us and made us able to do better.

Both must be held together – our dis-grace and our beloved-ness. Either without the other will ruin us. Sin – just like debt, Jesus said – will enslave you. But without a real assessment, without some truthful comprehension of the damage, you cannot begin to comprehend the love. So we come here on Ash Wednesday, to tell the truth. If not to one another, then to ourselves and God alongside one another: *We haven't been the people or the church we could and should and ought to be.*

Now we are saying so. Bringing forth our broken and contrite hearts, sure in the faith that God does not despise them. Let us continue in our confessing.

**Hymn** ~ How Deep the Father's Love for Us

## **Imposition of Ashes**

### **Explanation of Ashes**

We wear the ashes to remind us – on our foreheads for the next few minutes, in our memories for the next few weeks – to remind us that all is not well in the world. All is not well in our relationships. All is not well in our own hearts.

People are dying of non-deadly causes. People are in pain, both cruelly and casually inflicted.

We wear the ashes to remind ourselves that left to ourselves we will never be well. But we have not been left to ourselves, Beloved. Jesus came, and Jesus died, and Jesus rose again, absorbing all that we've inflicted upon ourselves and each other, leaving us with life and life and still more life than we can ever, ever live.

Would you sing with me: *Jesus, remember me, When you come into your kingdom.*

## **Benediction**

So let us take up the ashes  
as a beginning and not an end;  
the first sign but not the final.  
Let them rest upon us  
as invocation and invitation,  
and let them take us  
the way that ashes know to go.  
May they mark us with the memory of fire  
and of the life that came before the burning:  
the life that rises and returns  
and finds its way again.  
See what shimmers amid their darkness,  
what endures within their dust.  
See how they draw us toward the mystery  
that will consume but not destroy,  
that will blossom from the blazing,  
that will scorch us with its joy. ©

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**Removal of Ashes** ~ *Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ~ Matthew 6:1*

## **Postlude**