

Ash Wednesday
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Bruton Parish Church – Williamsburg, VA
Ash Wednesday – February 14, 2024

Sara Miles lives in the Mission District in the city of San Francisco. She first encountered God when she poked her head into St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church and tasted Communion bread for the first time. That taste led her to a process of conversion from not believing in God to falling in love with Episcopal liturgies, starting a food pantry that took place around the altar of the church, being baptized and confirmed, and becoming a lay preacher and pastor. In her book, *City of God: Faith in the Streets*, Sara describes some of the powerful experiences she had on Ash Wednesday in 2012, both in the services at St. Gregory's and taking ashes out into the streets of the Mission District. She says, "I began to discover faith in the streets of my city – especially through the liturgies of Ash Wednesday, with their recognition of common mortality and their call for repentance and change."¹

The book tells the stories of the people she encounters in their real lives in the city. But the part that I want to share with you comes close to the beginning, when she reflects on conversation with her rector while preparing for the early morning Ash Wednesday service she participates in at her church.

¹ Miles, Sara, *City of God, Faith in the Streets* (New York: Jericho Books, 2014), xi.

Sara writes, “Repentance, in Christian practice, is not a psychological or an emotional process.” And then she quotes her rector, Paul, as saying, “Jesus doesn’t care if you feel guilty. Jesus wants you to change.”²

Jesus doesn’t care if you feel guilty. Jesus wants you to change.

Lent is sometimes described as a season of guilt. But truly, it’s not. Feeling guilty can leave us miserable and wretched, but it doesn’t change anything.

It’s our actions that show something has changed. When we repent, we stop what we’re doing and return to the Lord. We *may feel* guilty if we’re doing something wrong, or if we’ve made poor choices, or if we’re hurting other people, but that’s not the point. The point is to change our minds, change directions, turn away from what we’re doing and turn back to God.

Change is hard. For us as individuals as well as us as a faith community. But it’s what we’re called to do as followers of Christ. And Lent is a perfect time to start.

Jesus doesn’t care if we feel guilty. But he does want us to change.

What do we need to change this Lent?

In the book, Sara goes on to say, “Neither is repentance about simply saying you’re sorry. ‘That’s just apology,’ explained Paul, ‘which is about etiquette. Repentance is about rebirth. It means putting on your big-girl panties and facing the world to do things differently.’”

² Ibid, 20

Sara goes on to describe repentance in this way, “Repentance means turning toward other human beings, our own flesh and blood, whenever they’re oppressed, hungry, or imprisoned; it means acting with compassion instead of indifference. It means turning away, ‘fasting,’ from any of the little and big things that can keep us from God – drugs, religion, busy-ness, video games, lies – and accepting the divine embrace with all our hearts. Repentance requires paying attention to others, and learning to love, even a little bit, what God loves so much: the whole screwed-up world, this holy city, the people God created to be his own.”³

“Repentance is about rebirth.” Rebirth. Not guilt or wretchedness or looking dismal. Repentance is about rebirth.

Dying to sin and being born anew.

Dying to behaviors, habits, patterns of thinking, fear, worry, judgement, resentment, hypocrisy, power, selfishness, perfectionism, the need to control, being right, self-loathing, envy, dishonesty, prejudice, waste.

Dying to anything that pulls us away from God and from each other or that puts up blocks between us.

And then, rebirth. We get to be new, free from all that *stuff* gets in the way.

When we die to sin, we are reborn to faith, trust, love, joy, peace, forgiveness, kindness, generosity, mercy, openness, a sense of our own goodness, a sense of God’s abundant gifts. Those things that draw us ever closer to our creator.

³ Ibid, 20-21.

Last night at the pancake supper Chris said that Lent is not about punishing ourselves; it's about emptying ourselves. Emptying ourselves of all that does not serve us and being refilled with all the good things that come from being in right relationship with God.

What do we need to die to this Lent?

What is drawing us away from God and each other?

What needs to be born in us anew?

Sara calls us the people God created to be his own. All of us with our joys and sorrows, our gifts and our imperfections. And she suggests that repentance means learning to love, even just a little bit, what God loves so much – the people God created to be his own.

In the beginning, God formed us from the dust of the ground and breathed into our nostrils the breath of life. God's own breath gave us life. Breath and dust formed our mortal bodies. When we die, we will return to that dust as the priest casts dirt upon our coffin or into the grave to mingle with our ashes.

The lives we live here have been given to us as a gracious gift from God.

The life that we will live beyond the grave will also be given to us by God, through Jesus Christ our Savior.

Repentance is rebirth, right here on earth. A foretaste of the resurrection that is to come.

We do not live forever here.

We are dust and to dust we shall return.

How will we choose to live our one wild and precious life?

Now is the acceptable time.

Now is the time to repent.

Now is the time to change.

To die and be reborn.

To return to the Lord our God and to be reconciled to the one who created us.

The one who sees us and knows us and loves us as his own.