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Ash Wednesday
Year B
University Presbyterian Church
Tuscaloosa AL
25 February 2009

NOTHING IN VAIN
2 CORINTHIANS 5:20b-6:10

The Heidelberg Catechism begins with the question, "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" Our only comfort in life and in death...hmmm...wait...wait...wait...that is a "your" not an "our." I know. I know. English has its limits. "You" may be singular or plural. You better believe that I leaned on this in Greek and Hebrew classes, but I know that this "you" is singular, because the answer to the question begins with an "I."

What is your only comfort in life and in death? "That I belong---body and soul, in life and in death---not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ." There is more to this answer, but tonight is about beginnings.

The Lenten journey starts here. It begins now. It is a pilgrimage on which we embark together, and yet it is one that God calls us to travel individually. Sure, it is possible to piggyback on another person's faithfulness and eventually arrive at Easter, but to do is to deprive one's self of the joy that comes from trudging through the muck and the mire, to use Paul's language, of enduring "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights and hunger."

Of what use is human suffering? In it, Paul says, we find "purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech," nothing less than the "power of God." But isn't there another way? Not for human beings...

Because the truth about us---the truth about you, the truth about me---is this: we live, and we die, and life is much richer and death is more peaceful when there is comfort. In Jesus Christ, God

grants us comfort, and yet this comfort is not to be taken for granted. The Spirit of God opens us to suffering; the Spirit of God opens us to joy so that we may live purposefully and obediently whatever comes.

And this is something that we do privately and publicly. We do it by ourselves; we do it together. Please give your prayerful attention to Paul's statement: "As we work together with Christ, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain."

Thus the church observes Lent. As God's covenant people, we are led out of Egypt and into Canaan. We travel the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Grief or Suffering, trusting that God listens to you and to me---and to us---at an acceptable time and that on the day of salvation God helps us, because that is who God is and what God does.

Why do we impose ashes? To remember that we---you and I---are ashes: we are ashes, and to ashes, we will return. Remember that you are dust, and to dust we shall return; and while we have some choice in how we live and how we die, the fact of life may feel as harsh as the fact of death, and yet "unknown...we are known; dying...we are alive; punished...not yet killed; sorrowful...rejoicing; poor...rich; having nothing...possessing everything."

There is a story that I remember well. I do not remember the title or the author (which is humbling given how much I write as a pastor and professor), but I do remember where I was, what I was doing and how I was feeling when I read the story.

The story begins with a young man driving home following the death of his father from whom he was estranged. The plot twists again and again until it is time for the young man to drive home, and he does so with his father's ashes in tow. The natural world presents problem. It is cold, and it begins to snow. The snow thickens. The car stops. The young man is stranded until it occurs to him that it is possible to gain traction. He reaches into the passenger's seat where his father's ashes sit. He uncaps the urn and sprinkles the ashes beneath the tires of his car so that he may drive home safely. By

remembering his father's ashes, the young man finds freedom. May we find such freedom by remember that we are ashes, and to them, we will return. Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! Amen.