



Cleora United Methodist Church
Ash Wednesday Worship Service

February 17, 2010

WELCOME & ANNOUNCEMENT:

Pastor Rich extended a welcome to all who attended, and explained that Ash Wednesday is the first day of the season of the church year we call Lent. Lent is observed for the 40 days (excluding Sundays) before the Easter Day. He explained that the ashes used in the service are the ashes from the burning of the palm branches used in last year's Palm Sunday observance, and that they represent our mortality and our need for repentance.

An invitation to our regular worship services, our Palm Sunday worship, including our Palm Sunday Community Easter Egg Hunt & Potluck, our Maundy Thursday worship (a remembrance of our Lord's Last Supper), our Good Friday worship (a remembrance of our Lord's Passion), and both our Sunrise Resurrection worship and our regular 10:00 am Resurrection Celebration on Easter Sunday.

INVOCATION & SILENT PRAYER

First we all prayed in silence, then Pastor Rich prayed saying:

"Almighty and everlasting God, your Son came to save sinners; we come to this season of repentance, confessing our unworthiness, asking for new and honest hearts, and the healing power of your forgiveness. Grant this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen."

CORPORATE GREETING:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

And also with you.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God's holy name.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all God's benefits,
Who forgives all our sins and heals our infirmities;
Who redeems our lives from the grave, and crowns us with loving
kindness.

HYMN: *"I Surrender All"* Hymnal Page 354

All to Jesus I surrender; all to Him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust Him; in His presence daily live.

I surrender all; I surrender all
All to Thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all.

All to Jesus, I surrender, humbly at His feet I bow.
Worldly pleasures all forsaken; take me Jesus, take me now.

I surrender all; I surrender all
All to Thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all.

READING FROM SCRIPTURE: Read by Jim Marshall, Liturgist

Psalm 51

¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.

² Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.

⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are proved right when you speak
and justified when you judge.

⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

⁶ Surely you desire truth in the inner parts;
you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

⁹ Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.

¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will turn back to you.

(from New International Version)

MESSAGE:

Rev. Rich Brasher

“From Here to Eternity – Part I”

Tonight, we gather as a unique church body. As we gather as Christians in Cleora, Oklahoma, we come as a unique body of Christ. We come as a small example of the church universal to a time when the church reviews itself and its actions. And as

individuals in Christ’s church we are called to a deeper level of self-examination. We’re called to an extended time of prayer and preparation. And part of that preparation is to allow the Holy Spirit to lead us to an open acknowledgement of the sin in our lives.

Today is Ash Wednesday, the first day of the Lenten Season.

Does anybody know how Lent got started? It’s not in your Bible – there’s no verse that says, “Thou shall celebrate Lent.”

Around the year 230 (AD) a group of Christians, in order to prepare their hearts for Easter, started fasting for 40 hours before sunrise on Easter Day. Pretty soon, the idea caught on. Years later, they bumped it up to 7 days of fasting, and they called it “*Holy Week*.” Then by 325 (AD) the church officially made it 40 days, representing Jesus’ 40 days of testing in the wilderness. Today, we observe this season of the church we call Lent for 40 days (not including Sundays) before Easter Sunday. The reason that Sundays are not included is because every Sunday is supposed to be a celebration of the resurrection or a “*mini-Easter*” celebration.

That’s kind of the “*Reader’s Digest*” version of the tradition of Lent.

Tonight, we begin a new sermon series which will carry us right up to Holy Week, called “*From Here to Eternity*.” “*From Here to Eternity*” was a novel written in the 1950’s and later made into both a movie and a TV series. It takes place in Hawaii just before the attack on Pearl Harbor. It’s a story about conflict; it’s a story about love (some of that love misguided); and it’s a story about people who didn’t know they were about to face something a lot bigger than they realized.

Now, I can’t recommend this book to you, due to some really graphic language and many themes that are definitely not Christian in nature and also themes that don’t reflect good family principals. But I titled this message series “*From Here to Eternity*” because the story of Jesus (His birth, His ministry, even His death and resurrection) is also a story about people

who don't yet realize what is about to happen, in an eternal sense. And it too is a story about conflict and love. It's about the greatest love there is. In fact, it's been called by more than one person "*The Greatest Story Ever Told.*" And after all, isn't that the reason Jesus came anyway; to lead us from here to eternity?

The part of this evening's scripture that Ash Wednesday calls us to focus on begins with verse 10 where it says;

¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

At your baptism you received from God an inward grace that brought you into the church universal, and cleansed you from your sins and much more. The truth is, we don't really know all that God does for us through His Holy Spirit at our baptism, it's a holy mystery to us. But we know that baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward grace.

If we were mature enough when we were baptized, we made a pledge to turn away from sin and to reject evil and injustice. If we were infants, a pledge was made by our parent or guardian that we would be raised and nurtured in the Christian faith.

If we are sincere when we receive our baptism, then baptism can do for us all the things that David prays in our scripture from Verse 1 through verse 9. It affords us God's mercy, washes away our sins, hears our confessions, reveals truth, and washes us *white as snow*. But (for most of us at least) baptism didn't give us a truly clean heart. We still had (and continue to have) the same earthly desires for temporal pleasures that are sinful in the eye of God. It's called temptation, and it affects us all. When David prays, "*Create in me a clean heart,*" he didn't even know about baptism, but it's important for

us to remember what we received from God and His Holy Spirit at our baptism and to seek this same additional grace from our Creator.

You've heard it said that the best defense is often a good offense. And "*From Here to Eternity*" is a novel that takes place just before and during the early parts of U.S. involvement in World War II. It was a time that would make this old maxim seem to bare itself out – to be only too true.

But I would contend that the best defense (in many cases at least) is to just make your enemy go away. By seeking to have God create in us clean hearts, we are asking Him to take away those earthly desires that lead us into sinful behaviors and ways; to remove any desires toward sinful acts, freeing us to no longer be enslaved to those desires. Additionally, we are seeking for God to us a heart that desires after Him and after His ways.

Then, Christian life doesn't have to be all about a list of dos and don'ts. When we know and understand what God has done for us, and when we come to know how much He loves and cares for us, we can then come to understand more of what He wants for us and what He has planned for us. And the more we know what He has planned for us, the more we no longer have those earthly desires that otherwise might lead us from here to the wrong eternity.

In fact, as Christians, we can do anything we want to do, but things we want to do get changed in the light of the love of God. Our desires get changed because we've seen what our old desires lead to, and recognize that our new desires point to fellowship with the only One who can genuinely and completely care for us, not only here but throughout eternity as well.

From a personal standpoint, I can say this: God has promised me that I will live a happier, healthier, longer, and more peaceful life if I don't do certain things and if I make sure that I do certain other things. And there are certain experiences in my past that have proven to me that God is faithful to that promise. I believe in that promise and I stand on it.

The challenge for us is that these temptations always seem to be with us in one form or another. Even when Jesus was tempted in the

wilderness, the Bible tells us that the devil "*left him until another opportune time.*" That is why God calling each of us tonight to pray this seemingly simple prayer everyday during the season of Lent:

¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

I read a story about how birds around Niagara Falls fly up to the falling water to get a drink. In the winter, each time they go in for a sip, a little ice would form on their wings and feathers. The more times they drink, the more ice builds up. People have watched as some of these birds go in for sip after sip and suddenly disappear into the falling water when the ice on their bodies becomes too heavy for them to be able to fly.

Just like the ice for these birds, the sin in our lives weighs us down. Lent is a time when we allow ourselves to focus in the little stuff that is weighing us down and then to do something about it before we are unable to fly.

Lent, however is not a time to be depressed and wallow in our failures, but rather a time to free our souls from the burdens of those failures. It is by admitting that we are sinners and that we want to change that we become free.

Tonight, we receive the imposition of the ashes. These ashes are the remains of the palm branches from last year's remembrance of what we call *Palm Sunday*, the day of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem before the Passover feast. The ashes represent our confession and are an outward and visible sign of our repentance, just as baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward grace and the mercy of a loving God.

As we seek forgiveness, and petition God to give us clean hearts, we remember our baptism, and we call upon God through His Holy Spirit to draw us even closer to Him through out this Lenten Season. Amen.

THE GIVING OF OUR TITHES AND OFFERINGS

OFFERTORY MUSIC: "*I Surrender All*" Chancel Choir
DOXOLOGY

INVITATION TO THE OBSERVANCE OF THE LENTEN DISCIPLINE:

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ; Christians have always observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection. It became the custom of the church to prepare for Easter by a season of penitence, fasting and prayer. This season of 40 days provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for baptism into the body of Christ. It is also a time when persons who had committed serious sins and had been separated from the community of faith were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to the fellowship of the church. The whole congregation is thus reminded of the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the need we all have to renew our baptismal faith.

I invite each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, to observe a holy Lent, by self-examination, penitence, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving; and by reading and meditating on the Word of God. So that we might make a right beginning, and as a mark of our mortality, let us now bow before our Creator and Redeemer.

(All prayed in silent confession)

Now hear these words from the Holy Scriptures: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9 NIV)

THANKSGIVING OVER THE ASHES:

The Lord be with you.

The Lord be with you.

Let us pray; Almighty God, You have created us out of the dust of the earth. Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence, so we may remember that only by your gracious gift are we given everlasting life. Pour out Your Spirit on these ashes and on us gathered here. And we give You thanks for this reminder of your unconditional love and for the means of your marvelous grace. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, **Amen.**

(At this point in the service, people were given instructions for our remembrance of baptism and the imposition of the ashes. Allowances were made for those who had never been baptized and for any who might not wish to participate.)

THE IMPOSITION OF THE ASHES & REMEMBRANCE OF BAPTISM:

The people then came down the center aisle, where Pastor Rich met them with a crystal bowl which contained water and beautiful blue pebbles. Taking one of pebbles from the bowl, Pastor Rich made the sign of the cross with the pebble, still dripping water from the bowl with these words: [name], remember your baptism. Then turning their had over to a receiving position Pastor Rich closed their hands tightly around the pebble and said, "Hold on to (your baptism) with all your heart, and remember the grace you received. Amen."

Each person then proceeded to the altar rail to stand or kneel and pray. Pastor Rich then came by with the ashes and made the sign of the cross in each person's forehead with these words: "Hope rises out of the ashes of our lives through the grace and mercy that proceeds from the Father, and Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

HYMN: *"Take My Life and Let it Be"* Hymnal Page 399

Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee
Take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.
Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of Thy love.
Take my feet and let them be swift and beautiful for Thee.

Pastor Rich: "When we share in a holy meal at the altar, or when we receive the water together as a reminder of our baptism and receive the ashes as we did here tonight we share in something special; something that comes from God Himself. And there is a reason why call that *communion*. It is because in doing so we commune with God, but also we commune with one another in a very special, intimate and personal way. And it is my prayer that we will all leave here, just a little closer to one another than we were when we came. Amen."

Pastor Rich then took another pebble from the crystal bowl, and holding it up said, "These stones represent a remembrance of how God can make something beautiful out of nothing. They serve as a remembrance of the grace we have received in our baptism, and the grace we continue to receive as believing and practicing Christians. I invite you now to carry this little stone with you in your pocket during the season of Lent as a reminder of God's grace and mercy."

Then he said, "So long as we confess our sins, God has promised us that he would throw them into the *sea of forgetfulness*." And with that Pastor threw the pebble into the bowl, making a big splash.

BLESSING AND SENDING FORTH:

Now open your hearts to receive God's blessing through the benediction:

As you go forth into the world in the strength of God's mercy to live and to serve in newness of life, my Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven, bless and keep you.

May the Lamb of God, who laid down His life for all, graciously smile upon you.

May the Lord God order all your days and all your deeds in peace and may you all be truly blessed.

And the congregation said, **Amen.**