

Sermon Transcript

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

3.5.25 - Ash Wednesday

Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return. The words we hear when receiving ashes are not just about death. Remember you are dust is also a reminder of our creation story. In the Book of Genesis we learn that God made the first person by forming them from the dust, forming the *adam*, the human, from the *adamah*, the humus.

God made us by hand, with loving care. The words You are Dust remind us that we are the beloved of God, and we will someday return to the earth, in union with God and with all creation.

Thought of in this way, our Lenten journey is really about taking time to clear away whatever it is that is making us forget that we are beloved, whatever is making us distant from God.

For me about 10 years ago, that thing was fear.

I was in a meeting with my spiritual director. That day, it felt like God was holding me like a kitten by the scruff of the neck and shaking me.

I had started seeing my director out of fear. I suspected that God was calling me to be a priest and it terrified me. At our first meeting she had said that for each of us, our call is about just getting closer to God, nothing more nor less, and this had chilled me out a bit.

But that visit, I was full of worry and fear -- how could this be happening? I was not holy enough. It was too late for me. I couldn't make such a big change. I didn't know how it could possibly work. Basically I was afraid of the cost -- spiritually, emotionally, logistically, financially.

I was blathering like this in an anxiety spiral, and my spiritual director eventually cut through all of it -- "Mary," she said. "It's almost Lent. Why don't you think about fasting from fear, and feasting on your priesthood?"

Fasting from fear. Hmmm. I had never considered a fast like that.

Right now we are living in a time full of fear. There are many people who have really good reasons to fear. Trans people. Immigrants. People facing floods and wildfires. Government workers. People in war zones around the world. And of course, many of these folks are not just facing fears but real trauma, hardship, and violence.

Those of us who are feeling less immediately threatened, well, we still have fear. We fear for the vulnerable people we know and love. We fear what changes might come next. And also, we continue to have the ordinary fears of life, worries about our health, our security, our children.

We could all use some freedom from fear, as President Franklin D Roosevelt called it. As the US was being drawn further into WWII but months before Pearl Harbor, FDR gave his now-famous Four Freedoms speech. Freedom from fear was the final freedom FDR named. He defined freedom from fear as an aspiration for everywhere in the world, to be achieved by reducing arms so that no nation could commit an act of aggression against a neighbor.

The Four Freedoms eventually became well-known and cherished, thanks to Norman Rockwell paintings and Eleanor Roosevelt using them as the basis for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But at the time FDR made his speech in 1941, it did not make a big splash. The idea of working for freedom for everyone, everywhere in the world, was not popular. It made people, well, afraid. What would they have to do for these freedoms? What would be the cost?

Often when we think about freedom from fear we think of individual security for ourselves or our own country, protecting ourselves with more locks and gates and alarms, more stockpiled weapons, not getting involved in wars happening far away. In his speech FDR was talking about security as a worldwide concept. Something that would involve the scary and risky actions of reaching out to our neighbors and eventually our enemies to reduce threats together.

Working toward freedom from fear today might mean we have to do some of the things Isaiah talks about in our first reading -- loose the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, share our bread with the hungry, bring the homeless into our house, not hide ourself from our own kin.

Isaiah tells us that if we do these things, our light shall rise in the darkness and our gloom be like the noonday. No more gloom, and no more fear. Because if we do these things, no one will have to fear injustice, oppression and hunger. No one will have to fear being estranged from their family. We will be free from fear, all of us, everywhere in the world.

It's a beautiful idea of spacious freedom. But to realize Isaiah's prophetic vision, some of us, those of us who still have the privilege to, we must let go of some fears.

The fear that we don't know enough, or will do the wrong thing.

The fear that we will be targeted if we stand up and speak out.

The fear that we will lose our own security.

The fear that we can't make a difference.

The fear that we will anger or alienate people.

I have had most of these fears swirling around within me during this time myself. And I know in my heart that if I become paralyzed in these fears, I have already lost my security, I have already ensured I will not make a difference, and I will be alienating people by my silence.

St Martin's, this Lent, let us fast from fear that keeps us distant from each other and from God. Let us feast on the freedom we might have, if we were not held back from speaking, reaching out, acting. Let us fast from fear. Let us be repairers of the breach. Amen.