
What A Friend We Have in Jesus

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Lauren Holder
Ash Wednesday - Year B**

How strange it is to find ourselves at Ash Wednesday this year. It was during Lent last year that the world seemingly shut down, and learned to start again in new ways, but with certain aspects of life on hold indefinitely. We thought we'd be able to celebrate together again by Easter! Then we thought perhaps Pentecost! We thought perhaps by the Peachtree Road Race! Surely by the start of school... surely by Christmas... surely... well, I'm not sure.

How strange it is to find ourselves at Ash Wednesday this year. A day marking the beginning of a season of contemplating our mortality—when this past year has already been a most difficult study of mortality.

Lent is often a time to slow down and pay attention—to shift our way of being in the world just enough to see the world differently. To get just uncomfortable enough to notice our relationships with God and our relationships with one another and our relationships with ourselves more acutely. Like going to the eye doctor and sitting in the chair in the darkness, looking at the letters projected before you, watching the letters shift in clarity with each flicking of a lens until—click—one minor shift and everything comes into focus. Lent is like sitting in that chair, paying attention, hoping that this minor shift or that will make everything clear.

I feel like I've been sitting in that chair for a long time. Slowing down. Paying attention. Allowing my eyes to adjust. And yes, even finding clarity—experiencing moments where everything clicks into focus... only to be fuzzy again the next day.

So excuse me if I'm less inclined to contemplate my own mortality and the mortality of friend and stranger this year. This year that feels less like a shift, and more like a rut.

Instead, this year I am drawn to the words of the 103rd Psalm, which we just heard chanted, listening to the recording from last year's Ash Wednesday service. The choir sings verses 8 through 14, ending with the familiar words, "For he himself knows whereof we are made; he remembers that we are dust." Remembering that we are dust if of course the most obvious reason for this Psalm on this day. But there is so much more to this Psalm on this day in this particular year.

If you were to read Psalm 103 in its entirety, you might be surprised to find a jubilant text, celebrating the goodness and mercy of God. It is a Psalm that begins and ends with praise!

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

If you are familiar with the musical Godspell, you know the snappy tune that accompanies these words, but I will spare you my singing it today.

In the portion we heard chanted by the choir, we are reminded that God is, "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." We hear that God is not angrily keeping score everything we've done wrong, that God does not love us only according to what we deserve, but instead that God's love is greater and bigger and more expansive than we can imagine: "as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is God's steadfast love." It's like saying God loves you to the moon and back... and then some.

And because God does not want to wallow around in our mistakes, weighted down in guilt and shame, God rescues us! “as far as the east is from the west, so far God removes our transgressions from us.” And God does this out of compassion for us, out of steadfast stubborn love for us. For God knows how we were made—of course! God made us! God remembers that we are dust. Of course! God lovingly formed us and breathed life into us. God knows and remembers.

When I read Psalm 103, I am reminded that Lent is not just about sackcloth and ashes, not just about rending our hearts, somberly reflecting on our mortality and depravity, no. It is not about God sitting on some throne waiting for us to bow down in shame confessing our sins, no. It is about God waiting for us in love, waiting for us to draw near and confess our sins in the full knowledge that we are already loved—even in our sin. And it is because we are already loved that *God removes our sin from us—not to make us worthy of love—but because we ARE loved.*

God waits for us like a friend. Like the friend you long to see and hold and touch—you know that one? The one you’ve missed so much this past year? God waits for us like that, ready to hear you share all the things—even and especially the messy sinful parts—in the safety of God’s loving enduring embrace. God waits for us like a friend.

The hymn I’ve been singing in my head for over a week now comes from my Baptist roots. It keeps showing up in my thoughts, so I’m beginning to think God is inviting me to make it this Lent’s theme song to carry around with me all season. Perhaps the words will speak to you too:

What a friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and grieves to bear
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer

Oh what peace we often forfeit
Oh what needless pain we bear
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer

Have we trials and temptations
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged
Take it to the Lord in prayer

Can we find a *friend* so faithful?
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness
Take it to the Lord in prayer^[1]

Friends, God knows how you were made. God made you in love. God remembers that you are dust. God holds you in love. I invite you to the observance of a holy Lent in the presence of that most stubborn life-giving love. I invite you to the observance of a holy Lent in the presence of your *friend*, our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

^[1] Hymn text by Joseph Scriven.