

**Ash Wednesday Worship
St. Andrew's United Church
February 14, 2024**

PRELUDE

WELCOME

Welcome everyone. This is officially the first day of Lent, a chance to reflect on our lives, and our opportunities make positive change in our lives, whatever that means to each of us. For those who attended worship at St. Andrew's last week, have your ashes take-home kit ready for the time when we impose ashes on ourselves.

OPENING MEDITATION

I have never tuned a piano, but I understand it takes hours. Small notes plucked repeatedly, like rain on a tin roof. Some things cannot be rushed. Some things require a steady hand, a listening ear, the intimacy of familiarity. Tuning an instrument and falling in love are both like that. Maybe that is why we pray to God, "Tune my heart," because we are desperate to be pulled into alignment. We are desperate to add our voice to the song, to get lost in a dance, to be in harmony with the melody of the universe. I've never tuned a piano before, but still I pray: *Pull me into alignment. Show me the notes to sing.*

OPENING HYMN

"Take My Life, and Let It Be" by Frances R. Havergal. VU 506, vv. 1, 2, 5

- 1. Take my life, and let it be consecrated, all for thee;
take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.**
- 2. Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of thy love;
take my feet, and let them be swift and purposeful for thee.**
- 5. Take my love: and I will pour at thy feet its treasure store;
take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for thee.**

SCRIPTURE READING: Psalm 51:1-17, VU p. 776

Refrain: God, I call to you for help; in your mercy hear my prayer.

Have mercy on me, O God, in your great kindness,

In the fullness of your mercy blot out my offences.

Wash away all my guilt, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I acknowledge my faults, and my sin is always before me.

Refrain: God, I call to you for help; in your mercy hear my prayer.

Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done evil in your sight,

**so that you are justified in your sentence,
and blameless in your judgment.**

Guilty I have been from my birth, a sinner from the time of my conception.

**But you desire truth in our inward being,
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.**

Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean,
wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear the sounds of joy and gladness,
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
Turn away your face from my sins,
And blot out all my iniquities.

Refrain: God, I call to you for help; in your mercy hear my prayer.

Put a new heart in me, O God,
and give me again a constant spirit.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
And strengthen me with a willing spirit.
**Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.**
O God, open my lips,
And my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

Refrain: God, I call to you for help; in your mercy hear my prayer.

You desire no sacrifice, or I would give it;
you take no delight in burnt offerings.
The sacrifice you accept to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Refrain: God, I call to you for help; in your mercy hear my prayer.

REFLECTION – a Poem

Tune my heart.
Like an old violin, like a worn down piano,
I have been left out in all manners of weather;
I have been left alone for far too long.

So like a concertmaster with a steady hand,
tune me up.
Listen and learn the cracked keys,
the broken strings.
Memorize the forgotten intervals
that even I did not know.
And then, when we're ready,
when this creaky heart is tuned,
teach me a new song.

VISIO DIVINA

Were you there is the title of this piece of Art for Good Friday.
“Were you there, when they crucified my Lord?”

This refrain from a well-known Gospel song dances in circles in my mind as I wonder where Peter is when Jesus is crucified. We know that Peter follows Jesus into the courtyard of the High Priest. We know he warms himself by the fire when, again and again, he denies being one of Jesus' disciples. Then Jesus is dragged away—to be tried, sentenced to death, and finally, killed. But where is Peter in the crucifixion story according to John?

Since we have to fill in the gaps of the story with our imaginations, this image functions like visual Midrash of Peter's experience when Jesus dies. I imagine Peter is frozen—with guilt, rage, and regret—still standing by the fire. I imagine he remains there for hours, unable to move, paralyzed by fear. I imagine he mourns privately, pleading for a miracle, praying the worst will not come, crying out again, "God forbid it!" (Matthew 16:22)

In the background, the shadow of a cross flickers like flames rising from the charcoal fire.

In this image, God's river of grace flows out from the cross and spills out before a bereaved Peter. Even in this moment of deep despair, God's abundance rushes to greet him. Peter's nets may feel as empty as the day Jesus crawled into his boat, but we know that an abundant feast—around another charcoal fire—shall soon come.

Take a quiet moment to reflect on this image and the background and what it says to you today as Lent begins. (silence)

IMPOSITION OF ASHES

Because we are online receiving ashes, if you don't have ashes at your fingertips, you may alternatively use vegetable or olive oil or soil from outside.

Lent is a time for us to return to our Creator who formed us from the dust of the earth. Our lives are finite, so we want to spend every precious moment in tune with God, living whole, abundant lives—the kind of lives we were created to lead. And so in recognition of our origins in the earth, in acknowledgment of our finite days, we come to receive ashes and remember: *dust we are, and to dust we shall return.*

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Holy Creator, you fashioned us from the dust and called us good, so very good. Your fingerprints remain all over us. Don't let us forget that we come from the earth, we will return to the earth, and every day in between is a gift from you. Gifts aren't meant to be encased in glass boxes and set high on a shelf, lest they show any signs of use. No, you gave us this life in the hopes that we would live it fully, using it up and letting it develop signs of wear and tear, a marvelous patina that proves we have lived.

But some days we'd rather be safe and sound, where nothing can touch us. It's a beautiful life, but the living can be so hard, God. All along our journeys we get

scraped knees, hurt feelings, missteps, mistakes, unexpected diagnoses, broken hearts, painful endings, and phone calls that change our lives in an instant.

As the paths of our lives wander through hills and valleys, as we get caught in the rain and the soles of our shoes wear down, tune our hearts to hear your voice everywhere. If we listen closely, we can hear it now. It's in uncontrollable giggles, birdsong at the window, the sizzle of a homemade meal on the stove, and melodies buried deep in our souls.

Yes, indeed, it's a beautiful life. Not because it's perfect, but because it's real. Journey with us, accompanying us as the path winds. Lift our heads to witness the majesty tucked around every detour. If we look closely, we might see your fingerprints. And if we listen deeply, we just might hear your voice calling us good, so very good. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

"Bless Now, O God, the Journey" by Sylvia G. Dunstan. VU 633

**1. Bless now, O God, the journey
that all your people make,
the path through noise and silence,
the way of give and take.
The trail is found in desert
and winds the mountain round,
then leads beside still waters,
the road where faith is found.**

**2. Bless sojourners and pilgrims
who share this winding way,
whose hope burns through the terrors,
whose love sustains the day.
We yearn for holy freedom
while often we are bound.
Together we are seeking
the road where faith is found.**

**3. Divine, Eternal Lover,
you meet us on the road.
We wait for lands of promise
where milk and honey flow.
But waiting not for places,
you meet us all around.
Our covenant is written
on roads, as faith is found.**

BENEDICTION

Beloved wanderer,
as you leave this place,
may you carry your curious heart on your sleeve.

May you look for God in every face.
May you find the courage to get out of the boat,
to run to the tomb, and to speak of your faith.

And when the world falls apart,
may you hear God's voice deep within,
saying, "Take heart, it is I, be not afraid."
You are called.
You are blessed.

In both your ups and your downs,
you always belong to God.
Go now in peace.
Go trusting that good news.
Amen.

POSTLUDE

Acknowledgements:

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Liturgy by Rev. Anna Strickland | A Sanctified Art LLC | sanctifiedart.org.

Psalm 51 from Voices United pp 776-777, Refrain 1.

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