

## **Sermon: “Into the Gray”**

Ash Wednesday, March 1, 2017

By: Dr. Jenny Whitcher

*The sermon was written by Dr. Jenny Whitcher, as an invited guest preacher to the Iliff School of Theology Chapel in Denver, CO.*

On September 11, 2001, I was a 20-year-old college student living in New York City.

That day, the authorities told us not to go outside, because there might be poisonous gas. The university dropped off pallets of plastic sheeting and duct tape in our dorm lobby so we could seal off our windows, doors, and air vents.

Then the news alerted us not to drink the tap water, because a biological weapon may or may not have entered the city’s water supply.

What do you do when you can’t breathe, like Eric Garner?

What do you do when there is no clean water to drink, like in Flint, Michigan?

I knew if I was going to die on that day, it wasn’t going to be alone in my dorm room. It was going to be out on the street with the people in my community.

On 9/11, I *tried* to listen to the advice of authorities—some things never change. But staying inside to watch the increasing threat level in the dawn of the 24-hour infotainment news cycle became too much.

So, I turned off the TV, left my claustrophobic dorm room, and went out to the street to breathe. To be.

Just to be, with others, the community, and into public space that had drastically changed. We walked around with face masks and tear tracks. Numb, unsure of what to do next. How to respond in a world turned upside down.

So, we held public space with one another in the sacred deafening silence of the unknown. We persisted, together.

We waded through the ashes together, walked miles hand-in-hand to try and donate blood that it turned out no one would need.

We refused to wallow in the ashes in isolation and fear.

Late at night on 9/11, I went on a bike ride with friends down to Ground Zero. The full security perimeter hadn’t been setup yet, and we were able to ride closer than we probably should have.

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As we drew near, I built up speed to quickly pass the watchful eyes of security and turned the corner onto a desolate street and started to coast. As I recovered my breath, the adrenaline faded away.

I looked up to see a slow, snow-fall of ashes all around me.

The air was so dense that office papers appeared suspended in mid-air, as they ever so gently floated amidst the skyscrapers after being released from their filing cabinets and copier machines upon impact that morning.

For a moment, I felt suspended in time amidst the plumes of smoke and ash.

As I sailed through this apocalyptic destruction, I encountered...peace.

It is not what I was expecting to be sure. But there God was, anyway, giving me the peace of knowing not everything was, or could be, fully destroyed.

Even in the midst of destruction, death, and the gray ash of life, there Jesus speaks: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. So do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14:27)

I share this story, because some of us need to be reminded that this “new world” of overwhelming destruction is not actually new. We’ve been here before, we’ve resisted, and persisted. Some of us need a reminder that insecurity, oppression, and violence is not new for many of us. Some of us have never known anything different.

I’ve seen one of our MDiv Internship Seminar Instructors, Rev. Dr. Arthur Porter, on campus about six times since the election and inauguration. When he greets people at Iliff with, “How are you doing?” The response is often a sense of overwhelm, shock, and surprise at what is happening in our country. Every single time, I’ve heard Rev. Dr. Porter, a black man, respond the same way, “Nothing has changed at all, really. Not for some of us.” I wonder if we are listening.

Things are not fine. They’ve *never* been fine.

And so, some of us need to be reminded of our call, so that we do not allow the overwhelm to overcome and incapacitate us, but rather, we walk through it and stand up together from the ash. For we are anointed out of the gray ash to be vibrant in God’s image.

It is painful to watch myself and others gloomily trying to make it through another day of public assault on our values, bodies, and loved ones.

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Perhaps we have to make a certain passage together in order to remember who we are, and whose we are. To process in community, not just privately in isolation.

Ash Wednesday is such an opportunity for communal spiritual processing of the grayness in our lives—or our separation from God and God’s creation.

I have a confession: I’ve never been comfortable with Ash Wednesday. I struggle with how Ash Wednesday and Lent are *performed* in the Church. It can feel like a form of penance based on a more literal theology of original sin—a purposeless and task-oriented competition to see who is sacrificing the most, and ultimately a remnant of a theology based on an oppressive, vengeful, destroyer God.

As a woman, that kind of theology is violent and disempowering. I get plenty of that from the world, and that critical voice of the world is deeply embedded. Instead, I need a Christ-like theology and a Creator-God kind of Ash Wednesday and Lent. I don’t need a way around, but I do need a different way through this ash gray season.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, a time in which we intentionally create an opening for God to enter into our lives. A season of formation in which we return to God and build the strength to resist and persist the injustice, pain, and violence of this world.

A time to reflect on that which separates us from sacred relationship with God and God’s creation, so that we might draw closer by asking for forgiveness and practicing sacred relationship.

Christians are not a people of mourning, we are not called to stay in the gray ash, but rather we are anointed by God and called to ministry with one another.

And so, you are invited into the ash grayness of a winter storm settling in like a vapor of nothingness that overcomes, leaving a disembodied sense of being lost, untethered, un-navigable. Out of control. Out of relationship.

You are invited into the gray, because on days like Ash Wednesday, we too comfortably rely on Biblical metaphors of lightness and darkness without problematizing their historic, power-filled real life implications and impact on whose bodies are oppressed and whose are privileged based on the color of their skin.

Whose bodies are illegal? No bodies. Amen.

Whose lives matter? Black lives matter. Amen.

You are invited into and through the gray, because it is part of our Christian theology and formation process:

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Birth, death, resurrection.

Baptism, wilderness, ministry.

In the Christian tradition, our liturgical calendar is a yearlong cycle of moving through the gray, year after year. Part of our role in ministry is to reimagine beyond the gray and to help move others closer into relationship with God and one another, to justice, to equity, and to ministry especially in the space between the Church and world.

You are invited into the gray because *this* is the same Lenten season that Jesus spent in the wilderness after his baptism, which was immediately followed by repeated temptation when Jesus was at his physically weakest and overwhelmed.

But Jesus did not succumb to the gray. He went through it.

The scripture tells us that in the face of temptation, Jesus resisted, persisted, drew closer to God and God’s call, and he was taken care of by God’s angels.

After the wilderness and temptation, Jesus went off to Galilee to start his ministry, which we all know was a walk in the park [sarcasm]...I mentioned this was cyclical, right?

The Gospel reading for today comes from chapter six of Matthew, a familiar text that warns against practicing righteousness in order to seek public praise.

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Creator in heaven.

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Creator who sees in secret will reward you.

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Creator who is in secret; and your Creator who sees in secret will reward you.

And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting

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may be seen not by others but by your Creator who is in secret; and your Creator who sees in secret will reward you.

Christians across the political spectrum are prone to reading the scripture too literally, without historical-cultural context, and as a result we can lose sight of what it truly means to be called to ministry in the world.

Progressive Christians, particularly, seem to interpret this passage to mean that we should pray, fast, and give to charity privately, or more broadly: to practice our faith privately and not publicly. Alternatively, more conservative Christians, seem to somehow miss scriptural literalism with these particular verses. Go figure.

Meanwhile, if you read the rest of the Gospel, almost all of what Jesus does is ministry in public spaces.

In chapter six of Matthew, Jesus is simply saying: don't be a “hypocrite,” which comes from the Greek term for “actor,” which meant one who seeks public praise or is deceitful. In speaking into the cultural context of his time, Jesus was resisting the Pharisees who strictly observed tradition and the law and tended to perform being “holier than thou.”

Translating to our current context, *who* are the people in our lives who are deceitful, self-righteous, and seeking public praise for their so-called faith-in-action?

And *who* are the people in our lives who are genuinely practicing their faith?

How many of those who are genuinely practicing their faith are doing so in private? Behind closed doors: In closets? In stained-glass sanctuaries? Only in relationships with people who agree with them, and praise them for their righteousness?

How many of us are willing to admit that we've veered dramatically into the realm of “holier than thou” thinking, speaking, and acting?

The inclination has always been there, but over the past couple of years, it's become more publicly present. In the last five and a half weeks it is omnipresent.

Our “holier than thou” attitudes and actions separate us from God and from one another.

To be a radical like Jesus requires that we practice our faith publicly, just not hypocritically.

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The final verses of Matthew 6: 19-21, read:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Now is the time to draw closer to God. To center your heart on God. To enter the Lenten season for the purpose of preparing for ministry, just as Jesus did during his time in the wilderness. Preparation for and the practice of ministry, whether ordained or not, can be an experience of going through the gray ashes. A transformation that prepares you for your vibrant call within the grayness of the world.

Remember who you are.

Remember whose you are.

And go. Go into the ashy grayness, and do not be afraid, for you are not alone. God is with you and will send angels to take care of you—but they won’t have wings, instead they will look like the person sitting next to you. And you will have to go out and practice your faith in public in order to encounter them.

Go. Go through the gray, and then rise up through the deep knowing that there is hope, and even joy in your call.

Go. Be in formation.

Go. Be in public practice of your faith.

Amen.