



Sermon for Ash Wednesday, March 5, 2025

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Isaiah 58:1-12](#)

[Psalm 103:8-14](#)

[2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10](#)

[Matthew 6:1-6,16-21](#)

In the name of God who creates us, redeems us, and sanctifies us. Amen.

Greetings, dear beloved of God. We begin a journey today, on this day of fasting, prayer, and confession. We begin a journey of courageous and vulnerable honesty – praying that God will help us be honest with ourselves, God, others, and the world around us.

Today, our scriptures bring us face to face with some basic truths about ourselves as human beings. We are fragile – like it says in Psalm 103, we are like the grass, and the flower in the field, that fades away. We are fallible – we are not invincible and not all-knowing, and we can get tugged and pulled in ways that set us off course. And we are faulty – every one of us, faulty, prone to errors and missing the mark and choosing what is not right or best. We sin.

These three we are, fragile, fallible, and faulty. These are not all that we are. There is much more to who and what we are, as beloved creatures made in God's own image. But these three are fundamental parts of us, parts of our reality. These are woven throughout the fabric of our lives, integral parts of our stories. Fragile. Fallible. Faulty. We are mortal, we are limited, and we sin.

I really appreciate the prayer of confession we can regularly hear in Roman Catholic churches, which we pray today in our Ash Wednesday service. "I confess to almighty God, *and to you my brothers and sisters*, and to the whole company of heaven, that I have sinned by my own fault..."

Confession is not a shameful act and does not need to be a shame-inducing act. Confession is the act of looking honestly in the mirror and admitting what we see that we often avert our eyes from seeing in ourselves. Confession is a bold and vulnerable act. The confessions we make today and consider more steadily through this season of Lent are three: that we are fragile and finite mortals; that we are fallible in our limited beings cannot know all truth or execute all our efforts without mistakes and misjudgments; and that we have acted, spoken, and thought in ways that are sinful, deeply at fault, because of how we have hurt others, ourselves, and our relationship with God and all creatures. Each of these is admission of truth. Each confession is a courageous, vulnerable act of admitting the truth about ourselves.

Today, we tell truth about ourselves that we don't always like to face.

So, sin.

Sin is layered. Sin builds, gains momentum, gathers crumbs, is stacked upon other sin that has gone before and that surrounds. We don't jump to a lie or a betrayal or some other act of harm or neglect out of the blue. Sin is layered and built upon sin.

Sin begins with subtle twists in imagination, thought, perception, presumptive assumption, ways we let our emotions and desires and fears lead us astray. Sin begins with the little ways we entertain imaginings,

think in certain ways, allow ourselves to develop twisted ways of perceiving others and ourselves, leaping to conclusions about others and ourselves, and letting ourselves think that just because we feel something then it must be true.

And this kind of twisting is nurtured in all sorts of ways, not just by ourselves, but by forces and sources all around us in the world. And it has been with us from the very beginning.

Let's go back to the Garden of Eden, and those first twists of the serpent.

"Hath God said?" "Is that what God really said?" *Let me introduce doubt for you.*

And then, when Eve responds by saying just what God said – and even extending God's command a bit further than God originally said to Adam ("we must not even touch the fruit of that tree") – the serpent responds, "You will not die. God knows that your eyes will be opened, and you will be as gods, knowing good and evil." *I think God has an ulterior motive. There is something to be suspicious about here.*

And so, the serpent twists God's intent, introduces an ulterior motive or intention. Here is the original conspiracy theory, right in the words of the serpent. We find ourselves drawn along this kind of path by people and parties in our world, painting one another in all sorts of suspicious tones. This then gives us space to think that we know better, we have some secret knowledge.

Here is just one way that sin enters and is nurtured and grows, as we give such things a foothold in our hearts and minds. Little by little.

Consider the different pathways of sin can open for us. In the early centuries of the Church, Christ-followers thought about this and came to an understanding of what we call the "seven deadly sins." There are wide paths we can take to wander astray. Pride. Envy. Wrath. Sloth. Avarice. Gluttony. Lust. But remember, it's not just these seven deadly sins in big capital letters, and the big actions that show those sins, that we are considering. Think about the ways that small steps and incursions accumulate. There are all the little prides, the little envies, the little wraths or animosities or hates, the little sloths, the little avarices, the little gluttonies, the little lusts. They have ways of creeping in, gathering, spreading themselves around.

And these are what we would place under the category of sins of commission – wrongs we do actively in our thoughts and words and deeds. There are also those sins of omission that we also confess – those things left undone that were really the right things to do. You know, those ways of offering and living love, hope, kindness, peace, patience, gentleness, self-control, faithfulness. Ways of offering and living courage or fortitude, truth-telling and truth-holding, care, prudence, and what is most true and real in ourselves and in the situations we face. We can so easily slip into little withholdings of love, withholdings of hope, of kindness, of faithfulness of peace, withholdings of patience and gentleness and self-control, withholdings of courage, of truth, of care, of prudence.

And we don't just gather sins of commission and omission on our own. There are the sins we inherit as patterns given to us, the sins we swim in without even recognizing, and the sins we benefit from because of what others have done or left undone. We are surrounded and immersed in sin – yes, also in the graces and good – but just as much in the sin of our cultures, our races, our ethnic heritages, our social and economic and political and systemic structures. And even those wonderful mediating structures that help us connect with the world – family, workplace/school, faith community, playground/park, neighborhood,

marketplace – these all become vehicles for our experiencing and learning patterns, yes, of grace and good, but also of sin.

So, little by little, we give way in our lives to sin taking hold, twisting us off course. And once it begins to take hold and we see the consequences of our choices, we seek to hide. And when asked directly about our choices, we deflect and try to shift the blame away from ourselves – just as Adam and Eve did when God asked, “Have you done what I stated for you not to do?”

Maybe the real descent into sin wasn’t in giving in to the trickery of the serpent’s seductive words and then eating the fruit – maybe it was in the failure to find courage to accept responsibility for what each of them had done, and in trying instead to shift blame to someone else.

I think about how things have crept into my family’s life, and the way I interact with my family. They are layered. Patterns build on each other. Things not acknowledged or dealt with have a way of hanging around, festering, expanding like mold on the walls and ceiling of a bathroom that isn’t cleaned regularly.

I know this is true for many of us in our families, here in this church – and in any church and community. Things accumulate. Left unattended, they can become bigger than we ever imagined. And if this is true in our families, think about how this is also true in our local communities, in our nation, and within and between nations around the world. We see it in the ugliness of Israel’s war in Gaza in response to Hamas’s horrific attack that emerged from years of festering animosity, judgment, anger, and rage. We see it in the continuing war of Russia on Ukraine, in the civil wars and strife across the middle of Africa. We see it in negotiations and attempts at accord that go horribly awry. We have seen and felt it quite directly in our country and in this region, as differences between people’s ideas and positions that became more intensified and rigidly held have not relaxed, with the ongoing problem of less and less capacity to hear one another.

There’s a book we use in work with clergy, titled *Fierce Conversations*. There’s a great quote from this book. “Our careers, our companies, our personal relationships and our very lives succeed or fail gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time.” Let me read that again. “Our careers, our companies, our personal relationships and our very lives succeed or fail gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time.” And, at the core, “**The conversation is the relationship.**” Not just with others, but with ourselves. What is the conversation we have been having with ourselves, and where is it leading us?

Things have a way of accumulating. This is why the twelve step programs in recovery from addiction encourage so strongly a close look at where we have gone awry and whom we have hurt or neglected – and then taking the lifelong pilgrimage of connecting with people to admit where we wronged them and to make amends. This can only happen once we have paused long enough to step back from our rehearsed scripts about who else was to blame and what excuses we had, and owning our part.

That is exactly what Isaiah is getting at in this prophecy that we have heard today.

Let’s not fool ourselves with feeling good about feeling bad today. Let me say that again. Let’s not fool ourselves with feeling good about feeling bad today. That is not the point. There is no reward for embracing shame this day. The point is not feeling bad. This honesty with ourselves and God and one another is not for shame or reveling in how much we can chastise and beat up on ourselves. The point is direct, courageous, open-hearted honesty – an honesty that reminds us to see ourselves, to turn our hearts and minds and actions in a different direction and with God’s help to take fresh steps forward. We

show ourselves and our change of heart not by how deeply we bow in public confession. We show ourselves and our change of heart by how we live and give and love and build and mend, from now on.

In Isaiah, the prophet says that God is not looking for us to do rituals while never changing our hearts, minds, and actions.

*“Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?”*

*“Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?...”*

*“If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, ...
then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday...
and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail....
you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”*

This is the invitation of Ash Wednesday and of Lent – to a brilliant, brave, vulnerable honesty with the God who loves and adores us and who calls us to such honesty because it is the path of healing, recovery of who we really are, growth into who we can truly become, and wholeness.

Come, be bold, open your hearts and minds, speak to God of things done and left undone, let yourself embrace the gift of honesty that God holds out to us as the path to life. And then, let your Lenten fast open fresh space in you for God to touch you in fresh ways with grace, healing, and new life you had not imagined. Today, let go of what holds you. Today, let go of all show and hiding. Today, come with boldness before the God who made you and adores you and wants you to know the fulness of life – come and say with open-hearted courage, “This I have done, and this I have left undone. I have done wrong. Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure, wash me, and I shall be clean indeed.”

God will hear. God has already heard. “For God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the whole world through him might be saved.” Come with bold honesty. For nothing can keep us from the love that God offers without end – truly, without end – to each one of us and to all the world through Jesus Christ. To Christ Jesus be all our thanks and all glory.