

ASH WEDNESDAY

BEGINNING WHERE OUR STORIES END

Read Matthew 27:57-61; Psalm 51.

Our Lenten journey begins at the place where all our journeys end: the stony silence of a tomb. We begin at Joseph's tomb, the place where Jesus' body was laid to rest.

My favorite place in the Washington National Cathedral is the Chapel of St. Joseph of Arimathea. Deep below the nave, the chapel is formed by the massive piers that support the Gloria in Excelsis Tower that rises three hundred feet above the highest point of land in the District of Columbia. Twelve descending steps create the feeling of descending into the tomb while sensing the full weight and glory of the tower above.

Behind the altar, a mural by Jan Henrik De Rosen depicts Joseph leading the procession to the tomb. The people's heads are shrouded or bowed except for one young man who helps carry the body. He faces directly toward the congregation. Looking into his eyes, I often wonder what he is saying to or asking of us.

On Ash Wednesday, the young man reminds me that we all make this journey. It's the ruthlessly honest word spoken as the ashes are placed on our foreheads, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return."

Nothing is quieter than death, nothing more silent than a grave. Lent leads us into that silence. The church invites us to break away from the nonstop chatter of our culture in order to be still long enough to hear God's voice. Our Lenten journey begins with this invitation:

EASTER EARTHQUAKE

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church,
to observe a holy Lent:
by self-examination and repentance;
by prayer, fasting, and self-denial;
and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word.
To make a right beginning of repentance,
and as a mark of our mortal nature,
let us now kneel before our Creator and Redeemer.

(UMBOW, no. 322)

Lent begins at the tomb where we acknowledge our dusty humanity and confess our sin. With the guilt-ridden David in Psalm 51, we name our need for God's mercy, forgiveness, and cleansing. With saints throughout the ages, we cry,

Kyrie eleison.

Lord, have mercy.

Christe eleison.

Christ, have mercy.

The powerful paradox of Lent is that we make our way to the tomb in the promise of resurrection. We wear the ashes of our mortality in the hope of eternal life. We name our sin and acknowledge our need in the assurance of God's love and grace. Paul expressed that paradox when he wrote these words:

As dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. (2 Cor. 6:9-10)

Like the earthquake in the Gospel, a 5.8-magnitude

earthquake shook Washington, DC, on August 23, 2011. As the energy from the quake traveled upward, it shook the highest and most slender elements of the Gloria in Excelsis tower. Delicate pinnacles, each weighing thousands of pounds, burst apart from the seismic force unleashed in less than a minute. Repairs will take more than a decade at an estimated cost of \$22 million.

But the tower still stands with its foundation deep in the walls of St. Joseph's chapel. Standing firmly in the place of death, we know the hope and promise of the glory that rises above us.