

Ash Wednesday ~ Year A
February 6, 2008
The Reverend Amy H. Morehous

“In the Name of the God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer...Amen”

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“It is near – a day of darkness and gloom, and day of clouds and thick darkness!”

If you heard Father Howard’s sermon on Sunday, he spoke about the gift of taking the long way, the gifts of learning from the sufferings of the past. I have a friend, Jan, who calls the fruits of difficult times the “hard gifts” – things that are unlooked for, unwelcome, but in hindsight turn out to be the places where God was present, was transforming us in powerful ways. She herself faced one of those times. One morning, she drove her 5 high-school-age children to school, and then returned home, only to find that her husband was still in bed. He had died in his sleep at the age of 46. She calls the things she’s learned in the 6 years since his death her “hard gifts”.

Ten years ago, David and I had our own day of darkness and gloom, of clouds and thick darkness. We were living in Cleveland, Ohio. We’d been married about a year, and we’d just bought our first house. We were so thrilled. We really felt like the king and queen of Cleveland Heights, Ohio.

We’d lived there about 6 months, turning the house into our home. The Friday after Labor Day, I came home from a Bible study at church. I’d almost gone to the grocery store first, but decided to go home, instead. I opened the back door, and was greeted with rolling black smoke. And wild noise – there was all this terrible and frantic beeping.... I was so shocked that it took me a few seconds to realize what was happening. I’d come home to find my house on fire.

I was absolutely frantic to find our cat, who was inside, so I dashed to the front door, to see if I could see him, could call him to me. However, I couldn’t see anything, the smoke was too thick and I began coughing convulsively. I realized pretty quickly that I’d never find the cat if I died of smoke inhalation first.

I ran out of the house and across the street to a church. I shocked the poor church secretary by dashing in, and asking her to call the fire department, and gasping out my address. I ran back and waited on the front porch for what seemed like hours, watching for flames, hearing something crackling, but not knowing where the fire was, or how fast it was moving. Finally, I heard the wail of the siren. Someone said to me afterward, “It must be really terrifying for you to hear a siren, after all that!” I told her, “Actually, at that second, it was the most beautiful sound I’d ever heard.”

When we finally got to look at it, the damage was pretty spectacular – at least to us. Many of our wedding presents – all the fine things that people give you when you're setting up housekeeping – went up in flames. Everything we owned that hadn't burned was covered in a thick, heavy film of oily, black soot. Other than the clothes we had on that day, between us Dave and I had each other, two cars, and a terrified cat, found under a bed. We had nothing to wear, no food, and nowhere to sleep. The firemen had given me strict instructions that the smoke had been highly toxic, that anything it touched was not safe to use. Everything had to be either sanitized or destroyed. We didn't have so much as a bar of soap that wasn't contaminated. We were 26 years old, and our families were 1,000 miles away.

I remember shuffling through a drug store like zombies, tossing toothbrushes and soap into the cart. The insurance company came in, and arranged the next steps. Slowly things were cleaned up or tossed out. We began to itemize the things that no longer existed...to start piecing together the things that had made up our lives.

Through all of this, I kept telling everyone that we were really grateful. After all, I kept saying, it was just 'stuff'. Those were things...we were fortunate to be insured...things can be replaced. No people died, no one was even injured...we were so lucky, we kept saying. And we sort of believed it. We were lucky that I came home in time, we said, before more of the house burned. But I admit, underneath that, I didn't believe any of that.

I didn't really feel lucky at all. I'd gone to sleep in a world that was comfortable, and familiar and safe. Now I felt angry, and vulnerable. Later, I realized I lost more than stuff – what I really lost was my sense of security. I had a house that still reeked like a barbecue pit, a cat that soon became terminally ill from smoke inhalation, and, suddenly, I lived in a world where disasters crouched around every corner. I asked the questions that everyone asks when faced with any kind of catastrophe – whether it's a relatively minor disaster, like ours, or something major – a death, a difficult diagnosis, or a natural disaster, just as the people of West Tennessee faced this morning. What kind of God allows these things to happen? And why?

But our friends in Cleveland, those around us, they were faithful. They kept showing up, just when there was something we needed. They didn't believe us when we said we were "Just fine, thanks." They fed us for months with food, but what they really fed us with their fellowship – their willingness to walk through difficult times with us, to show us the face of Christ, when we desperately needed it.

The young assistant minister, who'd been ordained all of 3 months, came and held my hand, and told me jokes, until Dave could get home from work. Friends of ours from Sunday school gave us somewhere to sleep that first night, until we could find a hotel. Our choir director brought us some clean T-shirts until we could get some of our things cleaned. After we eventually returned to the house, our Sunday School class took turns bringing us meals...for something upwards of six months, as we lived in a construction zone. Slowly, slowly, life began to return to what it was beforehand.

What hard gifts did I receive from that fire? Many. More than I have the heart to make you sit through hearing tonight.

I learned that I can't do everything all by myself – that God gives us people who will offer us support and help, if we're willing to accept it. That's a hard gift I still wrestle with daily. I am still tempted, every day, to worship at the altar of independence, and self-sufficiency.

I learned what it felt like to be really homeless – to own nothing. I learned that things are so insubstantial...that they can be gone in an instant, these things that feel solid beneath our fingertips – they can just vanish in a puff of smoke. "Where your treasure is..." Jesus says to us in today's gospel, "there your heart will be also."

I learned that a lot of the things that we think are important really aren't. For instance, the fire didn't particularly care how good an interior decorator we were...it was an equal opportunity destroyer. It burned the things we really detested, like the really ugly kitchen wallpaper, but it also took the things we thought we loved, many of them given to us by people who loved us.

Above everything, the fire gave me the gift of knowing what it feels like to be stuck in a dark, dark place, where you're sure that the next catastrophe lurks just around the corner. Of all the hard gifts, that one may have been the hardest and it's the one I'm still not sure I'm glad to know. But it is a gift I'm grateful for daily, as I walk with people who are facing their own difficult times.

They were all gifts, hard won ones. They were gifts I would've preferred to learn in any number of different ways. But I didn't get to choose the circumstances...I only got to choose what grew in my heart afterward.

If the fire hadn't happened, I don't think I would be standing here now. If I hadn't had that young minister's hand on mine, if she hadn't told me really inappropriate jokes to try and keep my mind occupied....

If I hadn't had others to care for me, when I was in need, if others hadn't shown me the face of Christ when I needed it, I wouldn't have been able to see those gifts for what they were.

I could have held on to those ashes that covered me that day, that filled my lungs and had me sneezing and coughing up soot for days. I could've held on to that anger, and bitterness, and disappointment. But if I had, I would've missed the path that led me here.

I have here one of the things that survived the fire. You'll notice it's a piece of pottery. All the wood and plastic vaporized inside our metal cabinets, as if they'd never existed; the glass slumped and dripped through the wire shelving. But this piece of fired clay survived. It looks okay from the top, but you'll notice here on the bottom where it was seared from the heat. It's been marked by its experience. It isn't the shiny new pot, anymore, but it still

works. For a long time, I could never bring myself to use this pot, because it reminded me of such a difficult time, and because I didn't think it was "pretty", like it used to be, like I remember it being when it was shiny and new. But I couldn't bring myself to throw it out, because it was a survivor. Now I kind of treasure it. It's a lot like me – and like each of us who come through a time of trial. Marked by our experiences, not perfect, but still durable.

We all have our own times of darkness, and doubt, and disaster. They come to us all, and they wear different faces – they may wear the face of death, or a difficult diagnosis, or a chronic illness. If this Ash Wednesday finds you in that dark, dark place, I can tell you that I know that those times do come. But I can also tell you, with certainty that those times do not last. We're made of pretty durable stuff, you and me. We won't be the same - in the end, we will never be the 'shiny and new' people we were ...we will be changed forever by our experiences. But we will come through each experience with gifts we didn't have before, hard gifts, gifts we probably never wanted to receive. My friend Jan said, even now, all things considered, she'd return every single one of her hard gifts for the chance to have her husband back. But, she also said she couldn't hang on to the ashes forever...she had to look ahead, to move forward down the path -- to look for a time of rejoicing, even amidst sorrow and grief. Paul sums it up for us: "Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing...having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

Tonight, on Ash Wednesday, we come together to confess our mortality, to contemplate that all that we have, and all that we are, will return to dust. After this service, we have the opportunity tonight to walk the labyrinth downstairs, to begin our journey together down the pilgrim path of Lent. Even tonight, as we sit together in worship, as we trace our steps to the center of the labyrinth, as we contemplate our own sinfulness, our own despair and agonies...in the midst of that, we are reminded that we are never alone in our ashes and death and despair. We will reach the center of the labyrinth – we will see and know a God that is ever present, ever mindful, ever loving, ever embracing.

Tonight, may you offer up your broken hearts, and receive the assurance of your pardon. Tonight, may you know your true worth as children of the living God. May your observance of Lent be a time for you to meet that embracing and forgiving God, the God who knows you and loves you just as you are – knows even your doubts and denials and difficulties, and loves you beyond the depths of your understanding. May you give that loving God the space to work in your life this Lent, to reveal those hard gifts to you...and may you find joy there, revealed to you amidst the ashes.

Amen.