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If the psalm and gospel readings tonight sound somewhat unfamiliar to your ears there's a good reason. Our Worship Team has adopted two new readings for this service: the 39th PSALM and the GOSPEL reading from LUKE. [1]

Psalm 39 – attributed to David – grapples with mortality.

And it seems to me this is not a psalm of the young shepherd David or the middle-aged David—at the height of his powers—but rather the old David, appealing for answers as he moves closer to the end of life.

> Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days;
> let me know how fleeting my life is…You have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.

These are the words of a person who understands that life—his life—will not go on forever—and that no amount of worrying can change that fact.

There is a certain humility that comes with the realization that the clock is ticking down and there are far fewer days ahead of us than there are days behind us.

David's cry is touching me a tender place as I receive updates on my older brother's declining condition. Yesterday I fielded two calls updating me on what's going on.

When the first call came, I wondered if it was THE CALL, and I braced myself. It wasn't that call, but I know—we all know—that call will come.

In my time at Peace I've presided at over 100 funerals.
But it's different when you're saying goodbye to a sibling.

It's different when the mortality you face is not someone else's but your own.

The truth embedded in every Ash Wednesday service is the fact that every person, every creature, born on this planet has an expiration date,
and there's nothing we can do about that.

> "So teach us to number our days," Moses pleads in Psalm 90,
> "that we may apply our hearts to wisdom."[2]

When we receive the ashes on our foreheads, we'll hear the words:
REMEMBER YOU ARE DUST, AND TO DUST YOU SHALL RETURN.

These are sober words; a reminder that our time on Earth will come to an end. But they are also a reminder that we are part of a larger cycle, a cycle that encompasses all living things—including planet Earth herself; a cycle in which we are brought back to origins, given back to the Source from whence we came.

[1] We reviewed the proposal from three NW Wash Synod pastors for a 3 year series and chose from their list.
[2] Psalm 90:12

"The sojourn of Lent, if we are able to abide it," writes Debra Murphy, "is 40 days of contending with our mortality so that we might more fully know what it means to live."[3]

How SHALL we live? That is the question!
And it's one Isaiah and Luke address—in different ways.

Isaiah 58 has a lot to say about fasting—most of it is critical.
God comes down hard on the people. What was their problem?

It seems that they had no problem going without food. In fact, they were pretty good at it.

They would put on sackcloth and bow their heads and make a grand show of it all. But they failed to connect this ritual of fasting with God's cry for justice and care for the hungry and homeless.

> **LOOK,** the Lord chides, **you fast, thinking you can get my attention,**
> **but in your hearts I see your real agenda**. **At the same time you're seeking my attention,**
> **you're taking advantage of your workers! Fasting like that just won't cut it!**

If fasting—in whatever form—becomes "going through the motions,"
it's not worth much.

If fasting is disconnected from the way we treat our fellow human beings or the other-than-human world, then it becomes simply an empty gesture.

How then SHALL we live?! The prophet spells out the solution in clear and unambiguous terms.

Using the LENS of this prophetic critique to evaluate and reshape our individual behaviors is a starting point. But Isaiah doesn't stop there.

The problem, says Isaiah, is SYSTEMIC. And if the problem is systemic, so must the solution be.

Sure, we can begin by making certain our own house is in order.
But it can't stop there. Step two involves showing up in the public square.

For if we just stick to our own personal sphere without engaging the LARGER CONVERSATION, without pointing to how the SYSTEM is designed to keep the rich rich and the poor poor, then nothing will fundamentally change.

The Jesus of Luke's gospel gets into trouble more often for his choice of dinner mates than for anything else.

When Jesus calls Levi to leave the tax booth and follow—Levi does just that and decides he'll throw a big party, and his guest list is in no way Kosher.

Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? His critics ask.

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[3] Debra Dean Murphy, *Lent beckons like an open door*. Christian Century, March 1, 2022. https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/lent-beckons-open-door?utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=d50e37994f-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_EdPicks+2022-03-01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-d50e37994f-86152947

Those who are well don't need a physician, he says. Those who are sick do. I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.

In her commentary on St. Benedict's Rule Joan Chittister shares a story about monastic living.[4]

A visitor to the monastery asked a monk,
WHAT DO YOU DO IN THE MONASTERY?
And the monastic replied, WELL, WE FALL AND WE GET UP,
AND WE FALL AND WE GET UP, AND WE FALL AND WE GET UP.

Chittister writes:

"The idea that the spiritual life is only for the strong, for those who don't need it anyway, is completely dispelled in the Rule of Benedict. Here spiritual athletes need not apply. [Christian community] is for human beings only… The Spiritual life is a process, not an event."[5]

The dinner tables Jesus frequented were microcosms of the stratified culture and economic disparity that comes with the territory of autocratic rule.

The question HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE? demands that we interrogate the assumptions that feed such stratified systems, and resist every effort to enshrine these systems in unjust and inequitable practices.

Remembering we are dust is no invitation to passivity.

It is a call to contend against evil and to resist whatever power or person that would lead us away from love of God and neighbor.

Amen.

[4] Page 150
[5] Ibid, page 151.