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Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA
Ash Wednesday
February 17, 2021
Joel 2:12-13; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21*

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of a 40-day season of reflection, or 46 days if you also count Sundays. This day, Ash Wednesday, we are thrust into that reflective time when we are faced with the reality of our life, and the reality of our death: you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

When you look in the mirror tonight you'll see both the horror and the hope in the cross upon your forehead. Right now, if you live with others, you see the sign of death on the people you love the most. And I wonder how it felt to make that cross with ash say to them: you will return to dust; essentially, you, my loved one, will die.

Whether we wish it or not, hearing and saying those words and feeling that cross of ash upon our foreheads forces us to take stock of our life, of our faith in God, of what matters most. And if we're really serious about reflecting on our lives, we will be honest not only about the things for which we are thankful, but also the things about which we repent.

Several weeks ago I had a Zoom meeting with Nancy Tupper, Pastor Bobbi from United Church of Ferndale and one of their church members, as well as Renee Swan-Waite, a member of the Lummi Nation, to plan the Lent conversations that Renee is so graciously providing for our two churches starting next Wednesday. One of the reasons we are having these conversations is that our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Task Force has been discussing having a land acknowledgement at the beginning of our worship services, such as United Church of Ferndale does, in which we acknowledge that our church sits on the ancestral homelands of the Coast Salish people who have lived here from time immemorial. In our Zoom conversation we talked about the fact that even though we ourselves and even several generations before us were not responsible for claiming those lands from the Coast Salish people, we all, as individuals and as a church, have benefitted from lands that once were stolen from them.

Today this cross, this sign of death upon our foreheads, reminds us that we are complicit in death – the death of others' dreams and rights, the death we unintentionally cause by our sins of omission, the death that our lack of understanding or apathy causes.

During Lent we intentionally stop to acknowledge and repent of the ways that individually and collectively we have contributed to death. We are called, as we heard earlier in the service, to a Lenten discipline that contends against evil and resists whatever leads us away from love of God and neighbor. In this season we return to the Lord, as we heard in Joel, with fasting and weeping and mourning, rending our hearts, so that we can turn from death to life.

Joel tells us that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. Our Lenten theme this year is repentance and gratitude, and in these verses from Joel we understand the connection between those two things. When we acknowledge how we have sinned—as individuals, as a church, as a nation—when we repent of how we have contributed to

the death our neighbors experience, we are heard and received and loved by a gracious and merciful God. We give thanks that it is especially in our sinful state that our God loves us into new life.

In these next weeks of Lent we will hear reflections from members of Christ Lutheran and United Church of Ferndale about how they have experienced repentance and gratitude in their lives, as well as what they have learned from holy listening. We will listen with repentance and gratitude to our Lummi neighbors, acknowledging that the privileges the majority of us have inherited are the result of literal and figurative death experienced by the Coast Salish people. I am certain in these conversations we will learn and grow into an even deeper gratitude for our Lummi neighbors, and into an even deeper thanksgiving for our gracious and merciful God, who makes beautiful things out of dust. Amen.