

Ash Wednesday 2020: "A Mouse Nest, a Tea Cup and a Suitcase"  
Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21  
February 26, 2020  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

This year's Ash Wednesday brain teaser goes like this:

"What do a mouse nest, a tea cup and a suitcase have in common?"

Keep your thinking cap on about that as you listen ☺.

I wrote a sermon yesterday which you won't be hearing. The Holy Spirit intervened while I was at Harold's Service Center in Spring Lake Heights yesterday. I'd gone there to pick up my car after an oil change. Pastor Mark had kindly accompanied me and offered to stay behind to pay the bill while I hustled back to town to meet my sister and nieces for an early dinner. As I headed out the door the nice man behind the counter said, "No, wait a minute, I have something to show you." [Holding up Exhibit A!] Stapled to the back of the invoice was this photo of what they found beneath the engine cover under the hood of my car. It looks like a bucket of popcorn spilled out, but it's actually a shredded paper towel that some resourceful critter used to make a nest for its babies.

During my December sabbatical the car was left undisturbed in the garage for 3 weeks. I'm guessing that's when the mouse or chipmunk mother-in-waiting went to work. The nest was vacuumed up pretty easily but we were cautioned to do something about the garage residents or at least to spray around the car and under the hood with rodent deterrent. We heard about another customer who didn't do that immediately and was back a week later with yet more damage to wires the stow-aways had nibbled since the first repairs.

So what could this possibly have to do with Ash Wednesday?? Well, Lent is a 40 day chance to check under our spiritual hood and see what may have taken up residence there while we were elsewhere attending to worldly stuff. Is there anything that has crept in uninvited and threatens to wreak havoc, preventing our soul from running smoothly and taking us where we need to go? Does anything (or anyone) have to be displaced to make room for God?

Speaking of which, here's where **the tea cup** comes in. One of my favorite vignettes from Henri Nouwen's writings is the story of a Zen master sitting down to teach a disciple. The session begins with the pouring of tea by the master. The student looks on as the master pours – and pours – and pours, until the tea has overflowed the cup and the saucer and finally begins to run off the table onto the floor. The disciple jumps up in alarm: "What are you doing??" And the master replies, "How can I teach you anything when you're so full of yourself? Empty yourself, then come back and we'll see what you may be able to learn."

There's a sacred tripod of Lent, an ancient three-part Lenten discipline, of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, reflected in today's Gospel. If **prayer** is how we look under the spiritual hood to check for our soul's well-being, **fasting** and "**almsgiving**," generous-hearted acts of financial charity, are how we empty our cup so God may fill it.

This is where the **suitcase** comes in, too. (Back to, "How are a mouse nest, a tea cup and a suitcase alike?") How about a show of hands for anyone who's ever had luggage weighed at baggage check-in at the airport and received the sticker of shame indicating it is **heavy** and you're going to be charged \$50 or \$100 extra because of the added weight? Then we chide ourselves that next time we really must travel more lightly. Lent is our annual reminder that we should travel lightly spiritually as well. Not in terms of clothes

smashed into a suitcase but maybe in terms of so many events jammed into a calendar that there's no time left for prayer or worship or listening for the still, small voice of God, for soaking up God's love or extending human love to our neighbor in need. Or maybe what we need to leave behind and refuse to drag along with us as we go on our Way (with a capital Way) is resentment – or self-pity – or a pronounced tendency to judge others harshly. Maybe the contents of the cup we need to empty or the suitcase we need to lighten is self-doubt – or even self-loathing – the self-flagellation, the second-guessing of past decisions that didn't work out so well that paralyzes us to make life-giving decisions in the present.

I have a favorite little prayer card with the sketch of a seashell on it. It says:

If thou couldst empty all thyself of self  
Like to a shell dishabited  
Then might [God] find thee on the ocean's shelf  
And say -- this is not dead –  
And fill thee with [God]self, instead.

May we all receive grace to look under the hood, empty our cup and lighten our suitcase during Lent 2020, so it may truly be the springtime of our soul. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham