

Yr. C, Ash Wednesday
February 17, 2010
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields
653 words

Lessons:
Psalm 103:8-14
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Kenzie Maxwell was about to turn 70...with his 3rd wife, his illegitimate daughter, his estranged brother, his priest and a small host of other characters. And a storm was blowing in at just the wrong moment. Dark clouds are like that—they are always blowing in at just the wrong moment.

It makes me think of Ash Wednesday, hanging like a dark cloud over our heads when we've really just found our stride in a new year filled with new hopes and possibilities. The days are getting longer now, and we long to emerge from the cold of winter. We're celebrating and feasting on Mardi Gras, and the next thing we know our priest is telling us that we are dust. We are mortal. We're going to die. It is the dark cloud blowing in at just the wrong moment.

Kenzie is the main character in a novel by Frederick Buechner entitled *The Storm*¹. It is a modern adaptation of Shakespeare's play with the same title—*The Tempest*.

Storms get our attention. Death—from time to time—gets our attention. And that can be a good thing if we know what to do with these experiences. How have you worked through your storms? How have you dealt with death when it has come too close to ignore?

Someone once told me that religion is about what you do with your pain.

We live in a culture that is obsessed with a religion of “success.” In this religion, pain is to be denied, ignored, or passed off for someone else to deal with.

In today's Gospel we hear about the religious hypocrites who believed pain was punishment for sin, and so they went to great lengths to show that they were *not* in pain, they were not being punished by God—practicing their piety with conspicuous almsgiving, loud praying, and impressive fasting to show that they were actually good buddies with God.

Jesus practiced a different kind of religion. It is the religion we are called to practice too. In Jesus' religion, pain is not denied, ignored or passed off to someone else. In Jesus' religion pain is not God's payback for sin.

No—in Jesus' religion, pain is just part of reality that deserves to be acknowledged, confronted and healed in God's name.

Sickness happens—not as punishment—but because that is just how biology works. And it needs to be acknowledged, confronted and healed.

Accidents happen—not as punishment—but because humans just make mistakes. And mistakes need to be acknowledged, confronted and healed.

Earthquakes happen—not as punishment—but because that is just how geology works. And suffering from natural disasters needs to be acknowledged, confronted and healed.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Storm* (NY:HarperCollins, 1998).

Death happens—not as punishment—but because we are just dust, and to dust we will return. And death deserves to be acknowledged, confronted and healed.

That is why we are here this morning. We are here to acknowledge our mortality, to confront it, and to be healed...not by avoidance, but with trust that Jesus will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Jesus shows us that even death can be healed in God's name—as indeed it was, when Jesus was resurrected to new life.

In Buechner's story, the storm is acknowledged, confronted and in the end some really valuable relationships are reconciled and healed. I guess you could call it an act of God—not the storm, but the love that was reclaimed and the life that was resurrected out of the experience.

Storms, darkness and death are all real, there's no denying that. The question is, "what are you going to do with your pain?" We are called to a Holy Lent—a 40-day season set aside to acknowledge and confront whatever storm or darkness or death is blowing in; and to trust that in God's name, nothing—not even death—is too much to be healed.

Amen.