

Let us pray:

Create in us clean hearts, O God.

Renew us, guide us, and heal us.

Amen.

As I was getting ready for this service I was drawn to the text of Psalm 51,

Which is the psalm that Andy read for us earlier in the service.

I grew up singing a different version Psalm 51 in church

As part of the weekly liturgy.

It's set to this really cheerful tune

(Sung) "Create in me a clean heart O God

And renew a right spirit within me."

It's catchy.

It's one of my favorites.

But I have a whole new appreciation for it

This year, in this hospital.

My dad was recently here at Lutheran General

For unexpected gallbladder surgery.

He told me I was allowed to talk about him today under one condition:

That I thank everyone who took such good care of him while he was here.

Thank you taking care of my dad,

And taking care of all the dads, moms, grandmas, grandpas, sons and daughters in this hospital.

I asked my dad what it was like to go without food or water,

To fast,

Before his surgery.

He said that feeling empty was actually a good feeling,  
Because it meant he was ready for the surgery that he needed so badly.  
Empty meant clean, and clean was good.  
Whether it's Lent or not,  
People in this hospital are fasting.  
And with that fast comes a prayer to be made clean  
To be made empty  
To be healed, and to be made new and right.  
I was happy with this Ash Wednesday insight  
And I wouldn't have looked into it any further,  
Until my dad reminded me that fasting,  
In Lent or otherwise,  
In the hospital or not,  
May be transformative  
But it's not easy.  
When I was four I was hospitalized and had two major surgeries.  
My dad says that being a witness to my fast  
Was much worse for him  
Than his own fast, and his own hospitalization.  
He felt frustrated when he'd coached me through a seemingly endless cup of contrast liquid  
Only to find out there were two more cups waiting.  
He felt helpless when I had a nasogastric tube  
And didn't talk, or laugh, or sing, the whole time that tube was in.  
During my dad's hospitalization I had a similar feeling of helplessness,

Of wanting to care for someone I love,  
And feeling like so many of the ways I normally do that  
Weren't possible.

Getting that clean heart  
And being re-created new and right  
Isn't easy.

It reminds me of the monarch butterflies my family raised last summer.  
The process of transforming from caterpillar, to chrysalis, to butterfly is ... beautiful  
But it's also difficult to watch.

My feelings as I watched the caterpillar's skin split down the middle,  
Were similar to my feelings when I saw my dad shortly after his surgery.  
How can a body survive such trauma?

After we are torn apart, how can we ever be whole again?

I knew that it was all part of the process  
But I was still moved by the struggle involved.

When you receive ashes on your forehead today  
You receive a sign of that struggle.

It is a retracing of the sign of the cross

You received at your baptism,

The sacrament that initiated you into the both the family of God

And the daily struggle of our lives

As we die to sin

And are re-created to new and right life.

The cross, a symbol of struggle and of death,

Becomes a symbol and a source of renewal and healing for us.

When you receive the cross of ashes on your forehead,

You will hear words telling you to turn away from sin and death

And turn toward the Gospel.

Or words that remind you

“that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Ash Wednesday reminds us that the struggles of this life are temporary.

That doesn't mean they are easy.

That doesn't mean we stop struggling to live.

It means that, like the psalmist, we put our hope in a God

Who is steadfast and abundant in mercy

Who gives nourishment to those who cannot eat

And who created us and re-creates us with new, clean hearts.

When you receive the ashes today,

May you feel God's loving hand caressing you,

Comforting you,

And claiming you as a beloved child.

And may God who is our hope in life and in death

Be with you as you seek to be healed

And as you seek to heal others.

Amen.



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