

**The Rev. T. Stewart Lucas
St. Margaret's Church
Ash Wednesday
February 25, 2009**

I had a painful realization over this last cold and windy weekend. I bundled up and went out to the backyard to bring in some wood to make a cozy fire so I could cuddle up to watch the Oscars Sunday night. But, as I walked down the back steps I soon discovered that there was no more wood in the woodpile. Somehow I miscalculated. What a bummer. It doesn't seem worth it to call for more wood at this point. It just means that I'll have to do all the work to stack it up again, and surely this winter is almost over. I'll just have to accept that we've had our last fire for this year. Oh well.

But alas, that means I have another task ahead of me. Those ashes can't stay in the fire place. It will have to be cleaned out. I'll have to dig through those old embers and find that little metal thing in the brick and lift it up and shovel the ashes through it. The ShopVac has to be carried up from the basement to finish the cleanup job. Then I'll have to traipse outside once again to open the little black iron door at the bottom of the chimney and scrape all the ashes out into a bucket. But as my grandfather and father taught me long ago, those ashes still have a job to do. They must go into the garden, because they have nutrients yet to provide. What once was dead still has life to give.

It turns out that the nitrogen and sulfur have been burned off as gases, but calcium and potassium and magnesium and 13 essential nutrients that my vegetable garden needs are all in that bucket of dust. They will help raise the pH and neutralize my acid soils. (Alas, don't spread them around your rhododendrons or azaleas though!)

"About 350 miles west of Morocco and about 550 miles southwest of Lisbon, there lies a verdant island, lush with greenery and life. Scientists now recognize the island as having been formed by an ancient volcanic explosion. The island was discovered in the year 1418 by one Captain Joao Zarco, sailing under orders from Prince Henry the Navigator. He found it virtually impenetrable, so thick was the forest and growth.

"Because the forest was so dense, Captain Zarco named the island for the Portuguese word for "wood." That word is "madeira." Then, Captain Zarco set about clearing the land. It was hard work. Deciding that the only way to clear the entire island was to use fire, he and his men burned the whole island.

"The island of Madeira burned for seven years. When the fire was out, the entire place was covered with a fine wood ash. That ash dissolved into the volcanic ground, combined with the clay and calcium already there, and an incredibly rich soil resulted, even more fertile than the previous soil. In fact, this became the same sort of soil which was conducive to fine wine.

"So, people began to grow grapes in the soil! Thus was the beginning of a fine wine named Madeira. By 1495, it was being produced. It became, in Europe, the after-dinner drink of choice. George Washington is said to have drunk a pint a day. Thomas Jefferson toasted the Declaration of Independence with madeira.

"Madeira -- a fine wine, born of burnt ashes in the soil."ⁱ

And so we arrive at the liturgical beginning of our Lenten journey to the cross. We begin with the mark of the cross on our foreheads remembering that we are but dust. This ancient symbolic emblem signals our own sinful mortality. This practice warns us of the coming dark days in Jesus' life, his passion and his death. Our readings today lend themselves to the ominous quality our penitent observance is supposed to convey.

The urgent reading from Joel sounds an alarm in the middle of the night. The people are helpless to save themselves. They are powerless to do anything on their own behalf. They are powerless, that is, except to repent of their sins and to crack themselves wide open to the God's intervening mercy and grace.

We know very little about the historical setting of Joel and so any allusions we concoct are shallow. But whatever the circumstances, there is an emergency at hand. The city is under assault. The people seem to be like a bucket of ash. They have become complacent and have no hope.

So the trumpet must be sounded again. This time it is not a warning but a call to respond. Authorize a fast, call the people together. The response to this crisis wrought by God is an act of deep intentionality, a religious one – an act of disciplining what is left from that shattered complacency. The call is to obedience, one that brings an end to all that easy indifference. The community has to have a 'come to Jesus' moment and get their act together. They can no longer engage in business as usual.

The people are called to repent and revise their ways. It turns out that the people have forgotten who God is. Actually they forgot God altogether, and society became distorted and disordered. The trying task set before the people in Joel is to rediscern God. "Return to the LORD, your God" Joel says. "For he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing."

It's heart-wrenching work to discern who God really is. It's hard enough to remember to keep God in the equation of our lives. Our lives clouded by the smoke and dust of whatever the crisis of the day, of our family, of our country or of our world. And suddenly you begin to wonder if you really are under attack.

But my friends, the hope and the reality is that God keeps returning. God keeps showing up. God is on our side. Not the side of one party or another or of one religion or denomination or another, but on *our* side. God is on the side of the beautiful creations that we all are, made in God's very own image.

The only thing we have to do is remember to return to God. That's the work set before us this Lent. We have to set aside our foolish ways and plow our sins and our disappointments and our failures into the ground. These next forty days are our time to repent of the evil that enslaves us and the evil done on our behalf. This Lent we have to return to the barn and sharpen our shovels and hone our spiritual plowing practices in community.

These next forty days are our time to get ready for God's faithfulness, mercy and healing grace to flow into the world. This is the time to prepare ourselves to receive those gifts, because when we don't, that power of death seems to gain the ground. We have a choice to turn in order to live, or resist that choice and die.

God wants us to choose the way of life. Because who else could have worked everything out so that when an old tree dies and is burned into a bucket of ashes, that those ashes could bring flavor to my tomatoes. Who else could have brought forth fine wine from a 7 year long fire of devastation?

Choose life my friends and choose to till the past into the ground of your lives. Take time in some way to prepare the soil of your souls for what God is about to do. Empty yourself of the old and get ready for a new life to emerge because even though we may have, God has not forgotten to return to us, a fine people born out of the ashes of our lives.

ⁱ The Very Reverend Sam Candler, Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta, Georgia. *Good Faith and the Common Good: Occasional Offerings from Sam Candler on issues of faith, church, and the world.*