

Ash Wednesday 2024  
February 14, 2024  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

“Seeking Hope in the Ashes” would be a great title for any Ash Wednesday sermon. But it wouldn’t be original. I found it in a newspaper headline about a week ago. The whole title was, “Seeking Hope in the Ashes After Fires Wreck Chile’s Botanical Garden.”<sup>1</sup> One of the largest botanical gardens in the world, Viña del Mar holds global as well as national treasures, including rare cacti and some species now extinct in the wild, like Sophora toromiro trees that used to grow on Easter Island. The collection has been added to, tended, lovingly nurtured for 107 years. Sadly, 98% of the 1,000 acre National Botanical Garden of Chile was consumed in recent wildfires. In one day, 40 square miles were burnt and 15,000 homes were destroyed.

Tragically, at least 122 people died in its flames, including a greenhouse keeper who lived in the park. Her 92-year-old mother also perished, along with 2 grandsons who were visiting for the day. The fire flew on the wings of El Niño winds that have caused drought and unusually high temperatures in much of South America in recent months.

So much loss and devastation, yet hope survived, that life-giving virtue that Emily Dickinson described as “the thing with feathers that perches in the soul, and sings the song without the tune, and never stops, at all.” The botanical park director, Señor Alejandro Peirano, was able to identify some rare specimens that survived the blaze. Whether they will thrive again will become clearer once the rains arrive in May, but he is hopeful. He compared some of the plants under his care with the 150-year-old banyan tree in Lahaina, Maui, that sprouted new leaves within weeks of the wildfires that decimated much of the rest of town. Those descendants of the trees that once stood on Easter Island (Rapa Nui) are still standing, as are Ginkgo biloba trees from the “Garden of Peace”. The living specimens in that peace garden are plants that

survived the nuclear bombing of Japan. Señor Peirano reflected, “They had the strength to sprout after Hiroshima... Now they will have double the strength if they overcome this stage, because the fire passed through them. The trees and what they represent will be twice as strong.”<sup>2</sup>

We come today with a renewed awareness of our sins, our failures in love toward our neighbors, toward ourselves, toward creation. We come with sadness over our selfishness. We come to be marked with ash as a reminder of our mortality and the deadliness of our sins. This is a day to realize all over again that Jesus bears **our** guilt on the cross: “the slave hath sinned, and the Son hath suffered,” as we sing on Good Friday. In the words of the prophet Isaiah,

*<sup>4</sup>...he has borne our infirmities  
and carried our diseases...  
<sup>5</sup>...he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed. (Isaiah 53:4-6 NRSV)*

We leave with the cross outlined on our foreheads, marking us for Life with a capital L. On this Valentine’s Day, imagine the cross as a heart, reminding us of our Lord stretching out His arms on the cross and proclaiming, “I love you **THIS** much!” Our Savior died that we may live. The truth and depth of the repentance we profess today will become clear as we live into the days ahead. Hopefully we will make different, more life-giving choices, than the narrow, limited, self-and-other-destructive choices that lay heavy on our hearts today.

Since the Chilean Botanical Garden had experienced fire damage in the recent past (2013 and 2022) intentional fire prevention has included clearing underbrush that would serve as fuel for flames. Likewise, Lent is a good time for us to clear away **spiritual** underbrush, the stuff that **clutters** our lives and **distracts** us from our most important Life assignments: loving God and neighbor. Another way to say it: we need to separate the trash from the treasure in our lives, guarding the treasure and putting the trash to the curb.

I went to seminary on the Upper West Side of NYC, so I saw bag ladies and bag gentlemen on the streets every day. One of the ones I remember best, though, was on a crosstown bus. It was a fairly long ride and the poor lady sitting or standing across from me spent the whole trip tending the Macdonald's wrappers in her shopping cart as if they were prized plants or pets. She took the Big Mac and other wrappers out one by one, flattened them carefully, folded them lovingly, put them back precisely. I'm guessing they were her only possessions in the world; she was guarding them with her life. She seemed crazy but content; I was sad to see how she **delighted** she was in what sure looked like garbage to me. Then a startling question came to me: what are the "Macdonald's wrappers" that **I'm** hoarding? In my Lord's eyes, what's the trash I'm treating like treasure? What's the "stuff" I value that's worthless in the eyes of my Savior? What are the activities into which I pour myself that aren't **worth** the precious investment of my time and energy? What important things are going undone because I'm focused on the wrong things? A climate scientist put it this way: "Why [am I] missing the elephants in the room while chasing the mice?"<sup>3</sup>

Lenten **sacrifice** is most appropriately what **Jesus** has already done, not anything **we're** planning to **do**, or planning to **stop** doing. But whatever our Lenten **resolution** is, may the Holy Spirit inspire us to make it something that glorifies God, brings us closer to God's heart, and blesses our neighbor. Let's pray it removes the underbrush in our lives that can fuel a wildfire of sin; let's pray it helps us separate worldly trash from spiritual treasure; let's pray it draws us closer to our Lord's heart, makes us more compassionate toward our neighbor, and makes us more attentive to the elephants He's concerned about than the mice that distract us. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>John Bartlett and Jack Nicas, "Seeking Hope in the Ashes After Fires Wreck Chile's Botanical Garden" (*New York Times*, February 6, 2024), A9.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Jonathan Foley, *NYT* Quote of the Day (August 19, 2022), A3.