

I'm not ready for Daniel's Confession. Its in the Scripture reading appointed for Thursday and Friday this week in the Daily Lectionary (EvLW p. 1134 under Lent 1):

"O Our God...let your face shine upon your desolated sanctuary. Incline your ear, O my God, and hear. Open your eyes and look at our desolation... We do not present our supplication before you on the grounds of our righteousness, but on the ground of your great mercies. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, listen and act and do not delay!" --Daniel 9:17-19

A prophet's role as confessor sometimes includes confessing sins on behalf of the people. Daniel was moved by the spiritual condition of God's people to "[turn] to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes, and prayed to the Lord God and made confession, saying, 'Ah Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled...' (9:3-5). I am no Daniel, no prophet, just a desolated pastor seeking an answer from God too. Standing in the church parking lot with my Ash Wednesday chasuble over my winter coat watching people going home from work, I sensed again God's great and awesome steadfast love for all people. Fourteen people came throughout the afternoon and evening to pray, repent, receive the sign of the cross in ashes, hear the promise of forgiveness in Christ, and receive his body and blood in bread and wine of Holy Communion. One by one, two by two, four at a time. Others wanted to come but couldn't; some didn't want to come, but the sign of the cross drew their attention anyway as they were passing by. Seeing the desolation of the cross—what is more desolate than a bare wooden cross and a simple communion table in a snowy empty church parking lot?—still allows us to sense our own desolation so that in shared desolation with God we may be renewed in covenant love for all people.

This year, two commemorations on the Liturgical Calendar following Ash Wednesday make a convoluted link between Daniel, Martin Luther, and Black History. Thursday, February 18 marked the 475th anniversary of Martin Luther's death in Eisleben, Germany. He successfully mediated peace between feuding brothers of the nobility, and then suffered a fatal heart attack. Thousands attended his funeral—no doubt a "superspreader event" for the plague was still ravaging some parts of Europe at the time. I think Luther would have liked the NRSV translation of Daniel's prayer, given what he said about righteousness:

"...I did not love, I hated the righteousness of God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God and... raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.... At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'Whoever through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely, faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel... Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates..."

Luther's experience of God's grace in Christ shaped the formation of the Lutheran Church, so that when King Christian IV of Denmark entered the race to find the Northwest passage in 1619, the crew of the *Unicorn* and the *Lamprey* were Lutherans. Their chaplain, Pastor Rasmus Jensen became the first Lutheran pastor in the New World when the ships became icebound near the place where Churchill, MB now stands. He held Christmas Eve service, with a sermon and mass, and then began conducting

funerals as the crew died of hunger and disease, one by one and two by two and four by four... Jensen is commemorated on the day he himself died, February 20. As a result of this disastrous failure, Danish Lutheran missions looked further south, and followed the sugar colonists to the Virgin Islands. The second Lutheran pastor in the "New World" began ministering to planters and soldiers there in 1656, ignoring the overwhelming population of African slaves. But God heard their cries and sent Moravian missionaries a century later "to plant a distant garden of grace" among them. By 1782, almost 9,000 black and coloured adults and nearly 3,000 children had been baptized. (Helen Richards, "Distant Garden: Moravian Missions and the Culture of Slavery in the Danish West Indies 1732-1848" at www.jstor.org.) Black lives matter.

I recently had occasion to reflect on white privilege. On the way to the church one morning this week, I stopped at my insurers to cancel the plates on a car we sold a few months ago. I had no bill of sale, could not name the buyer, and wasn't sure of the date of the transaction! Yet the two young women did all the searches online, found all the relevant information so I got a full refund and chatted with me like I was an old family friend all the while. As I was wondering why that had gone so well, I caught a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror: there was my white clerical collar, peeking out from under my winter coat, supporting my unmistakably middle aged white face peeking out from under my double masks. Then while I was driving, I heard on the news that Kimberly Squirrel, a young aboriginal mother, had died from exposure on the streets. Her desolate suffering in the bitter cold humbled me before the desolate cross: its not just reflection, its repentance that I need.

That desolate cross is what we mark with ashes on our foreheads, recalling our baptism into the gift of righteousness through Christ. It reminds us that we are set free from sin, death, and evil, and calls us to live in loving service for all people God loves. Ready or not, these first commemorations of Lent invite us to repent of systemic racism, fast from the benefits of white privilege, increase our efforts for reconciliation and justice, and pray with Daniel: "O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, listen and act and do not delay!" Amen