



Jan-April 2022



Ashes

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Ashes lay thick on windowsills; the glass panes are shattered. Shards get swept wearily into a bin. Smoldering fires from exploded missiles create more ash that is blown on the winter winds and through the vacant windowpanes. Everywhere: ashes. I know this. I've seen it on tv. We've all watched Russia's war in real time, played out on live television, in videos showing Ukrainians' futile efforts to mend or douse, and through dramatic photographs of their fear and anger. Now, floods of Ukrainian refugees are fleeing their homeland into neighboring countries, traumatized and exhausted.

For many of you with connections to Ukraine, the devastation doesn't go away when the tv gets turned off. Your memories of visits to a beautiful land, your support of mission efforts and mission co-workers, your fondness for Ukrainians you've met, all of that lingers even when the live images stop. I wish I could write profound words to heal our aching souls. I want to speak compelling words that change outcomes. The more I long for the right words, the more I'm drawn to Scripture. On this Ash Wednesday, we read again the words of the prophet Isaiah, speaking God's call to repentance. It is not a repentance for individual sin, but for the collective wrongs of the nations. May these words both call us into action and offer hope:

*Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?*

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

*Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

*If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,*



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*and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.
(Isa. 58:1-12 NRSV)*

As we begin our Lenten journey today, may we fast from injustice and oppression and turn again toward God.
Amen.