

This Ash Wednesday sermon begins with a Christmas illustration. Carol and I choose two simple wreaths for outside Christmas decorations. One is placed on the front door and one is on the front roof peak. At night spotlights, activated automatically at dusk, illuminate the wreaths.

You may remember that the Sunday after Thanksgiving—the first Sunday of Advent—was an overcast, rainy afternoon. At 3 p.m. I was startled to see the spotlights suddenly come on “early.” Then I realized two things: it was far darker than I thought it was, and the photocell did exactly what it was supposed to do: it activated the light in the darkness!

This seems a metaphor for Ash Wednesday, 2026. A full, then partial government shutdown, the suspension of SNAP benefits and health care subsidies for our most economically disadvantaged citizens, continued divisions in our nation and in and between our churches, the epidemic of gun violence, some churches considering or implementing security measures against possible incursions by Immigration and Custom Enforcement officers: it is a darker time than some of us thought.

For others, losses of employment and health, family discord and burdens of all sorts envelop us. The deaths of those dear to us—recently or in the past—make sharp the traditional words for the imposition of ashes: *“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”* My dear parents and my older brother and now among the saints of light. This past September three of my friends died, all in their 70’s, including one of my two closest college friends; a former colleague and long-time staff member at Golden Hill United Methodist Church; and a leader in the Hamden Plains Church who was a missionary to the Congo, a mentor to many youth, and whose children are friends of Carol’s sons. No one is spared.

Yet like the sensors on our spotlights, God does exactly what we hope and expect God would do when darkness comes. God brings the light in Jesus Christ. Those who follow Jesus, his disciples, are called “the light of the world” earlier in tonight’s Gospel, and are called to the Lenten disciplines of charitable giving, prayer and fasting. They are to be done “in secret,” so that *“the Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

There is, on a day like Ash Wednesday, always a temptation for self-righteousness; for insiders to congratulate ourselves on our faithfulness. Yet there are lots of legitimate reasons why people cannot be here in person mid-week. My own wife works an hour from here and at least until 7 p.m. on Wednesdays, to cite one example.

Yet it is also true that Ash Wednesday, and the Lenten journey it inaugurates, is a measure of deeper commitment, one that not one everyone chooses to take. An influential book in my early spiritual formation was The Cost of Discipleship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ultimately murdered by the Nazis just days before the liberation of the Flossenbürg prison camp in 1945. In The Cost of Discipleship, published in 1937—before the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia, before Kristallnacht, before the invasion Poland—Bonhoeffer addressed the increasing coziness that the German State Church – the Lutherans – had with the growing Nazi movement. Contrasting “cheap grace” with “costly grace” he wrote:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God."

Wow. What have we gotten ourselves into with this “disciple” business? Are we in over our heads?

Well, yes. And no. We are in over our heads if we think we can live this costly grace on our own. But if—as disciples, followers, learners—we are following Christ, then we have his life to guide us.

Several months ago I had trouble with the left, driver's side headlight on my SUV. Attempting to fix it myself didn't work, so I took it to my dealership. What happened then is a matter of polite disagreement, since I get on well with the service manager at the dealership. Whether they or I exacerbated the problem is the cause of disagreement. Regardless of that, a part had to be ordered and a repair appointment scheduled. What is a fact is that, when I first went to the dealership, my right front headlight still worked and I could still drive in the dark.

I left the dealership on a Monday and didn't have to drive in the dark for 36 hours after that. Imagine, then, that I am in Bethel, Connecticut for a Tuesday afternoon meeting with the District Superintendent that runs past nightfall. And know that Bethel is 30 miles and a 45-minute drive from my home in Woodbridge, outside of New Haven. And imagine that I leave my meeting, start my car, and find that I have only the faintest of running lights. No headlights at all.

So after consulting with Carol, who encouraged a different plan but realized—as she later said—that she was dealing with “a thick-headed German”—I began my journey home. I quickly realized that once I was outside the town limits and the ambient light from street lights and homes was no longer available, it was too dark to see or be seen. At that point I put on my emergency flashers and found that, by their light, I could be seen by other drivers and I could see the shoulder line and take my bearings from it. By local roads I made my way safely home, and the car was fully repaired—and my wallet fully emptied—the next day.

Besides confirming in some minds that I am truly an idiot, why am I telling you this story?

Because as I made my way home, I found that I could see best when I was following another car that actually had headlights. I could see where they illuminated the road and the shoulder. I could see their taillights and follow at a safe distance as they made their way, and a way for me. In my mind at the

outset I hoped that I could find a way that there were few or no others on the road. But I realized that I was safest when following someone with lights.

If this is not a metaphor for the Lenten journey, I don't know what is. We need to follow Jesus Christ, the light of the world, whose gift of costly grace has redeemed us. And we need each other. Life is tough enough: no one should go it alone. We, in the living of our individual lives and the ministries of which we are a part, are headlights for each other in the darkness of life's struggles. And Lord knows that the struggle is real, culminating in the cross before the gift of Easter dawn.

So my prayer is that this Lenten journey is, for each of us, one more step toward costly grace; toward following Christ, who shows us the way; toward supporting one another; caring for each other; following where others have gone so the way is not so hard for us. My prayer is that we can embrace the faith of the anonymous verse scrawled on the wall of a German concentration camp:

*I believe in the sun even when it is not shining
I believe in love even when I feel it not.
I believe in God even when He is silent.*

And I pray that we will grow in our discipleship, in our following of Jesus the Christ, whose light overcame darkness and whose gift of eternal love empowers us to share such love with a hungry, hurting world. Amen.