



Glenn Brady, *Ash Wednesday*, 2007, acrylic on canvas

Hope in the Ashes An Ash Wednesday Reflection

BY BISHOP PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER

Dear friends, on this Ash Wednesday, we begin a journey toward Resurrection Day by taking a 40-day pilgrimage called Lent. This has been the tradition of the Church since the 4th century.

Today, in many of our churches, our clergy, or worship leaders, will invite us into this new reflective season with these poignant words:

“I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-sacrifice; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word, and by listening to God’s voice in all creation. And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature...”

Then we will be invited to have an ashen cross signed on our foreheads while these immortal words are said, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Lent is a season where we befriend our mortality and brokenness, as well as the brokenness of our world. It is a time when we acknowledge that all is not always well with our souls. It is also a season where we seek to empathize with the pain that others are experiencing around us.

During Lent I am drawn to the moving artwork of Glenn Brady, a remarkable self-taught Australian contemporary artist whose painting of “Ash Wednesday” is pictured above. His artwork always exudes a certain somberness, with darkness pervading the canvas. However, they also usually include a symbol of hope, a glimpse of a new life that is possible. Hence his paintings embody the enigma of our lives

and world. About his artwork, Glenn says, “But as with everything with me I am always split between the love and anger of things around me in what I hear and see...frustration... So I just paint as much as I can... a couple of times a week...good things and bad things... which is how I feel I am a lot actually...half ok...and half not...split right up the middle...a good person... and not so good...but always trying...”

In so doing, Brady captures the paradox of life, which the 19th century English poet and mystic William Blake coins as the “fearful symmetry” of our existence. Blake speaks profoundly of this in one of his poems:

*Man was made for joy and woe;
And when this we rightly know,
Thro’ the World we safely go.
Joy & Woe are woven fine,
A Clothing for the soul divine*



Antoni Maciej Babinski, *Untitled*, 1980, oil on canvas.

The mystery of life is that it is intertwined with both joy and hardship – a clothing we all wear due to life’s very nature. Yet, while this Lenten pilgrimage reminds us of this reality, we thankfully know where the journey ends, at Easter, when new life in abundance is offered to all. It is important to be reminded that the English word *Lent* is a shortened form of the Old English word *lencten*, meaning “spring season,” hence our liturgical season of Lent always beautifully coincides with spring.

This is why the poet William Blake reminds us that our hope is found in the “divine”- in “God” – and continues his poem with a remarkable promise:

*Under every grief & pine
Runs a joy with silken twine.*

As we begin this Lenten journey I find myself also struck by a painting from the Polish artist Antoni Maciej Babinski, who was born in 1931. While it is untitled, it reminds me of so much of what is going on in our world at this time, when thinking of the recent tragic earthquake in Turkey and Syria, where entire cities have collapsed and approximately 45,000 people have died. It also reminds me of the suffering, the sense of loss and bewilderment that our Ukrainian sisters and brothers are currently experiencing due to the war that has befallen their land.

Babinski’s painting reflects lostness, distress, anguish, grief and even death. Yes, in the painting, there is a priest carrying a child, symbolizing the role of the Church in the chaos and tumult, reminding us that God is always present in the midst of whatever difficulty or tragedy that comes our way.

***“I want to tell
people there is
hope.”***

During our pilgrimage to the Holy Land this last fall, I had the joy of speaking with an elderly Arab Christian woman who beautifully embodied the hope that God provides. She was on pilgrimage as well, to thank God for God’s faithfulness in her life, as she had lost almost everything a little over two and half years ago in Beirut, Lebanon, when 2,750 metric tons of ammonium nitrate in storage at the port, which is in the middle of the city, exploded. Many of us saw those devastating images and videos of the destruction it wrought. Like the recent earthquake tragedy in Turkey, one was left without words.

I was reminded of the story of the 79-year old Lebanese grandmother, May Abboud Melki, who following that Beirut explosion also had no words at first. So, in the midst of her blown-out apartment in Beirut, with the place in shambles, the furniture strewn about, and the walls punctured with holes, glass and debris all over the floor, she sat down to her baby grand piano, that was miraculously not ruined, and played music. It was captured on video and it went viral, with millions of viewers. She herself, had survived the Lebanese civil war years earlier, with her apartment at that time having had bullets go through it. It required her and her husband to have to rebuild numerous times.

Following the devastating horror of the Beirut port explosion, when interviewed by the media, she said, after all she has lived through and experienced in her life that even now, “I want to tell people there is hope.” I encourage you to listen to her profound testimony to God’s faithfulness.



NFGM, "Testimony of Faith" Mrs. May Abboud Melki السيدة مي عبود ملكي، الشهادة إيمان،

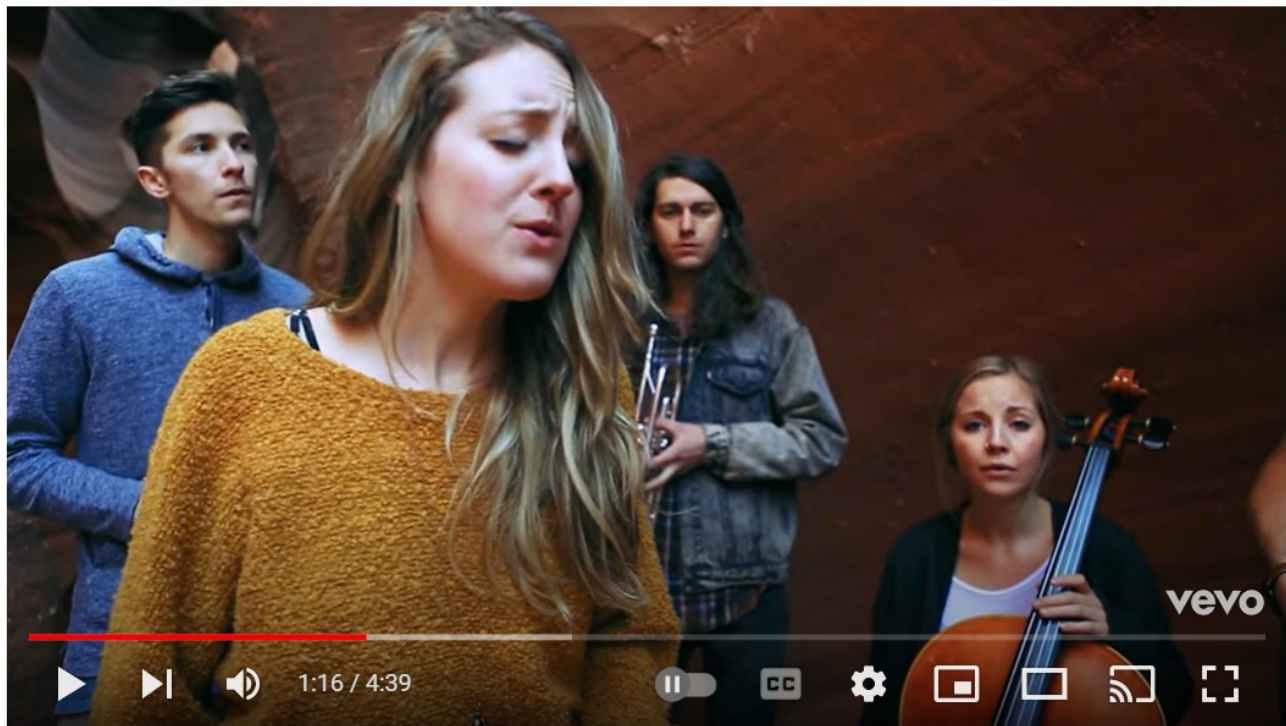
I close with the words of May's granddaughter in Beirut just a day after that explosion. As her grandmother played Christian hymns on her piano, in the midst of the devastation, with smoke and dust from the explosion still in the air, she looked at her grandmother playing, and said, "God can bring beauty from the ashes."

That, my friends, is essentially what this Lenten pilgrimage is all about.

Take hope, and I wish you all a holy Lent.

+Paul-Gordon

Special Music Offering: This Ash Wednesday I offer you this song from contemporary music group Tow's titled "Circles." It beautifully reminds us that God is always around the corner, seeking us out, ready to clothe us with that divine embrace.



Tow's - Circles (Live) [Click on image to watch video](#)

LYRICS

Longing for some distant day
Far from all the ash
Our bodies will soon decay
Like the garden that we left

[Chorus]

While I was searching for a feeling
You were searching for me

Circles are the perfect shape
To describe the hearts of man
As soon as he finds it near him
It leaves and comes back again

[Chorus]

While I was searching for a feeling
You were searching for me

I heard You in the cool of day
Your voice was trembling in the trees
I was afraid then of what You'd say
You clothed me

[Chorus]

While I was searching for a feeling
You were searching for me