

Sermon for 22 February 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Ash Wednesday

Scriptures: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51: 1-17 (UMH 785, Response 1) ; 2 Corinthians 5 :20b-6 :10 ; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“Surprise”

I was surprised, a couple of weeks ago, when I looked ahead to see when Lent began, to find it was almost here. I'm now going to read my favorite Gospel commentator, Fred Craddock's reflection on Ash Wednesday for this year. (Here I read his Ash Wednesday notes on Matthew's Gospel in "Preaching Through the Christian Year").

Surprise.

One question we Methodists were asked at our ordination was John Wesley's: "Are you going on to perfection?" to which we answered, "I am." Then, "Do you expect to be made perfect in this life?" Again, the expected reply was, "Yes."

If that sounds weird, think of it in this way. Jesus is quoted as saying, "Be ye therefore perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect." We Christians aim for a capacity to love one another and all God's creation as we ourselves are loved. That is the goal of Lent: to school us in charity, so that it is more and more natural as we go through life. We are surprised by the joy of loving and being loved, more and more fully, as we learn to receive the love that surrounds us and all creation.

May we go on towards perfection together, through Jesus Christ. Amen.