

**““Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him?”**

They said it couldn't happen there. Practically on the Polish border, it was too far east for British bombers to strike. Dresden was a cultural center of Saxony, nicknamed Florence on the Elbe. It was a center of manufacturing luxury goods: cameras, porcelain, and watches. Air raids happened in western cities or Berlin, not in Dresden.

That also seemed to be the attitude of Martin Mutschmann, the Nazi regional leader tasked with the responsibility of preparing the city for the possibility of an air raid. The city was woefully unprepared, but Mutschmann had his own private bunker.

The air raid started the evening of February 13<sup>th</sup> went into February 15<sup>th</sup> 1945 which also coincided with Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day, just like this year. The British Royal Air Force bombed by night and the United States Air Force bombed by day with over 1,000 heavy bombers in the skies dropping over 3,900 tons of bombs.

Many things went right for this to be a devastating bombing raid. Good weather allowed for bombers to reach their targets, lack of German air defenses, and an unprepared city with its citizenry unfamiliar with how to react to such a strike. In other German cities, bold civilians left their bomb shelters to put out fires in their infancy rather than letting an inferno form.

All told, the resulting firestorm that struck Dresden destroyed over 2.5 square miles of the city center, and 25,000 citizens were killed. If they were not engulfed in the flame, they suffocated as the fire literally sucked the air out of basement cellars replacing it with poisonous carbon monoxide. What didn't help is that Dresden was already at capacity as many refugees from other German cities fled there for safety.

Of the vast property destruction, the historic Frauenkirche, or Church of our Lady, which was completed in 1743, was destroyed in the raid. This famous Lutheran church building seemed indestructible and witnesses of the Prussian invasion of Dresden in 1760 noted that cannonballs bounced off its sandstone dome like peas off of a turtle's shell.

Frauenkirche never received any direct hits during the raid, but the temperature in and around the church reached 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit, and it lost its structural integrity the morning of February 15<sup>th</sup>. The church would lie in ruins for the next 45 years as East German Communists didn't make a budget for

cathedral repair. But this isn't a sermon about Dresden, this is a sermon about Hugo Hahn.

Born in Estonia, Hahn served as a pastor there until his brother, also a pastor, was martyred by the Soviets in 1919. He fled to Germany and served as a pastor there and was eventually called to serve as the pastor at the Frauenkirche in Dresden.

When the Nazis took power, he refused to bow to their authority. The racist ideology of the Nazis claimed that blonde hair blue eyed so called Aryans were the master race. They sought to codify this in public positions by forcing institutions to adopt a paragraph which would not allow non-Aryans in leadership positions. This included a handful of ethnic Jews in the Lutheran church. Hahn would not stand for it.

He joined a parallel organization called the confessing church as made famous by another German Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Nazis imprisoned Hahn for a short time in 1934. Transfiguration Sunday February 1938 was Hahn's last Sunday in the Frauenkirche before the Nazis exiled him from Dresden. Almost exactly seven years to the month, on Ash Wednesday, fire burned the Frauenkirche to the ground.

Hahn would return to Dresden after the war to serve as a pastor there, returning to the same Soviet regime that killed his brother. However, he served despite the difficulties for the sake of his flock in Dresden. Hahn serves as an example of faithful Christian confession even in the face of extreme persecution.

The theme verse for the first half of our Lenten series is Revelation 7:9 **“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands”** The end times vision of the Church is one consisting of all nations. The vision of heaven is bigger than the so called master race and it includes ethnic Jews, Arabians, Africans, Asians, and every ethnicity. Hahn fought for the church of all nations. But this isn't a sermon about Hugo Hahn, this is a sermon about Jesus.

Moving from “Will you be my Valentine” to “Remember that thou art dust and to dust you shall return” is like switching your car into reverse on the freeway. It is an insane juxtaposition of holidays, but we understand that even Jesus' harshest warnings are a sincere act of love.

Jesus is no hippie who lives and lets live. He turns over moneychangers' tables and He condemns the Scribes and the Pharisees. He is the God who the prophet Joel will later comment, **“The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth quake.”**

His hatred and repulsion over sin, false gods, and the devil makes our hatred of the worst dictator or totalitarian regime pale in comparison. He hates those things which would drive us away from Him. He hates those things that will ultimately harm us. He drives you to see that the things that you care for the most: money, romance, grades, reputation, or pleasure are but dust and ashes. You are but dust and ashes.

The thing in your life that is your Frauenkirche, a seemingly immovable, indestructible fortress, is not beyond the Lord's ability to destroy if it keeps you from worshipping and loving Him. Your job, the harmony in your family, the relationship with your significant other—whatever it might be—cannot withstand the thousand degree burning of God's wrath.

The Church is the Church of all nations, and if there was ever a time that we felt uncomfortable when someone who didn't look like us joined us in church, or if we thought the color of someone's skin was a determiner of their skills or value, we repent of those that, too. The vision of heaven is one where people of all nations are welcomed and valued.

As we consider Valentine's day this evening, know that true love is not sleeping with your boyfriend or girlfriend as true love keeps members of the opposite sex pure until they are within the bounds of marriage. Know that true love does not consist in the dollars spent on someone you love. We look to Jesus to see true love.

We read in Joel 3:16 **“The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth quake. But the LORD is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel.”** The Lord calls you to repentance so you can be safe in His loving arms. These are arms which embrace, arms which forgive, arms which welcome. Arms that carried the cross, arms which were nailed to a cross, and arms which bore the weight of the Father's wrath for sin.

And that is why we gather on Ash Wednesday, to know that we are dust finer and vaster than the Dresden city center in February 15<sup>th</sup>, 1945. However, the Lord forms man from the dust. Repent of your sins, and trust in Jesus who welcomes sinners. No sin is too bad. Jesus forgives each and every one of your sins, no matter how deep, no matter how dark. Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful.

Hugo Hahn's memoirs are titled *Fighters against Their Will*. He and his colleagues didn't want to have to resist Nazis, but that was what he had to do to love his country and love his people. On this Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day, our Lord Jesus calls us to make sacrifices out of love for others. We may be fighters against our will, but we trust that Jesus will bless our undertakings and forgive us where we fall short.