

The Church of the Good Shepherd

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Ash Wednesday – March 6, 2019

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

From the psalmist, we hear these words on Ash Wednesday:

8 Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure; *
wash me, and I shall be clean indeed.

9 Make me hear of joy and gladness, *
that the body you have broken may rejoice.

10 Hide your face from my sins *
and blot out all my iniquities.

11 Create in me a clean heart, O God, *
and renew a right spirit within me.

These words are from Psalm 51, which is customarily read or sung on Ash Wednesday. These words are our cry of repentance as we begin the holy Season of Lent. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." These words perfectly sum up our petition to God on this holy day of repentance, fasting, and prayer.

Ash Wednesday marks the first day of Lent – a 40-day fast in preparation for the Feast of the Resurrection on Easter. It was the practice in the early church for penitents to begin their period of public penance on the first day of Lent. They were sprinkled with ashes, dressed in sackcloth, and obliged to remain apart until they were reconciled with the Christian community on Maundy Thursday, the Thursday before Easter. When these practices fell into disuse around the 9th century, the beginning of the penitential season of Lent was then symbolized by placing ashes on the heads of the entire congregation, recognizing our corporate need for repentance.

Why do we still undergo this ritual of ashes that is centuries old, as old as the prophets who pleaded with God's people to turn back from sin and towards God? As one writer put it, "We go because we need to go, because at least once a year we need to be reminded that our deepest hunger is the hunger for God."

Lent is a gift that the Church celebrates every year. It is a gift of time, a gift of contemplation, and a gift of quiet so that we may listen to the Spirit, who whispers to us to come back to the God who created us. It encourages us to turn away from the noise and over-indulged appetites so that we may understand the hunger that can be filled—with the grace of God—only by prayer, fasting, and giving to the poor.

The ashes we put on our foreheads are supposed to be a reminder that our lives are short and we must live them to the fullest. Ash Wednesday comes from the ancient Jewish tradition of penance and fasting. The ashes symbolize the dust from which God made us. As the priest applies the ashes to a person's forehead, she speaks the words: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." This makes me think of the late medieval Christian practice of reflection on mortality called *memento mori*. This is a Latin term that means "remember that you will die" and is employed especially as a means of considering the vanity of earthly life and the transient nature of all earthly goods and pursuits. *Memento mori* has been an important part of ascetic disciplines as a means of perfecting the character by cultivating detachment and other virtues, and by turning the attention

towards the immortality of the soul. This practice finds particular ritual expression in the rites of Ash Wednesday.

We currently live in a culture that distances itself from all signs of death and illness. We are surrounded at all times by media that promotes the idea that not only happiness but possibly also immortality itself is possible if only we look here, buy this, consume that, go there, or do whatever. While this may be immediately comforting, we are left with an emptiness that comes from living in denial rather than truth. We would rather not have reminders of *memento mori*. I mean, really, who wants to think about death? But fleeing from the truth has never brought anything but heartache and bondage of another sort. Remembering the truth of our mortality may in fact be the key to our freedom - as the sixteenth century philosopher Montaigne put it, "To practice death is to practice freedom. A man who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave."

This is why we need the Church. The cycles of the church remind us of the truth of who we are, who God is, and how are we to be with each other. The Church reminds us that we are, in fact, human and mortal. Life is a fragile gift given to us and will, indeed, come to an end. The church reminds us that we are fallible sinners in need of God's redemption, mercy, and transformation. The Church reminds us that while no one of us is perfect, God does indeed love us perfectly and completely. Despite our weaknesses, God promises that if only we repent and return to communion with God, God will receive us with open arms; for, as the prophet Joel proclaims, the Lord, our God, "is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

We also need the Church to remind us of the bold Christian hope that, while inevitable, death is not the definitive answer - that God is continually bringing new life out of death; that hope may be found even the hardest and most barren places. At our baptism, we receive the mark of the cross on our foreheads in chrism, as the priest says, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." On Ash Wednesday, we are reminded that we are marked as Christ's own as the ashes are traced in the same pattern on our foreheads. As Pastor Emily Heath writes, "Each of us will one day return to dust; we cannot avoid that. Ash Wednesday reminds us that when that day comes, Christ will claim us."

But it is not just the truth of our mortality that matters, so too matters how we live. There is a holiness to this season of Lent and its focus on repentance. Each year, I look forward to unloading the burden of my sin, giving over to God my failures and shortcomings I am not strong enough to bear alone. I must confess that deep in my heart, I'm often better at Lent than I am at Easter - I can more easily acknowledge my sins than celebrate God's Love.

It is important, however, to remember that the practice of repentance is *faithful* only when undertaken in the promise of God's unfailing Love. To do otherwise, is self-debasement and self-contempt and not repentance. While we are called to an honest and courageous effort of self-examination and reflection during Lent, we are called to do so with the merciful and loving eyes of God. This season is about shining the light of Christ into the deep, dark and neglected corners of our soul, purging what needs to be removed and loving what remains. We do so courageously with the knowledge that while we may repeatedly fail to live up to God's precious image impressed deep within us, we are nonetheless beloved children of the very God who offers perfect forgiveness.

So, in a little while, you will come forward to receive and bear the sign of your penance and the mark of your mortality. This act is a sacramental one, by which it is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. No one is required to keep the ashes on your forehead after the service. Some may choose to do so as a reminder to themselves that they are mortal and fallible, while others may choose to leave them on as a witness to their faith. Still others may choose to remove them as a sign of humility and the private nature of their penance.

There is a rule of thumb that I once heard that asks you to look inside yourself for guidance about this. If you really want to wear your ashes in public, perhaps you are indulging in a bit of self-pride and you should wipe them off. If you really don't want to keep them on your forehead, maybe you are embarrassed to show your faith and some humility is what you need...keep them on. This alone might be the first spiritual discipline that you will engage in Lent.

Let us, then, enter this season of repentance remembering who we are called to be and who God is. Let us discover again that where we are weak, God is strong.... where we fail, God redeems... and where we may fall short, God will carry us. God is with us in our virtues and our vices; our living, and our dying. And this day, we are reminded that though we will, indeed, die, we are also given God's promise that even in death we are claimed by Christ.

Amen.