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The Church of the Good Shepherd
Ash Wednesday – February 17, 2021

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Ash Wednesday is a Christian day of prayer and fasting that marks the beginning of the season of Lent, that six-week period of repentance in preparation for Holy Week and Easter. Frederick Buechner writes this about the season of Lent: “In many cultures there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth of each year's income to some holy use. For Christians, to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year's days. After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness, where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves.”¹

If taken seriously, this leads to a challenging self-examination. What does it mean to be me? What does it mean to be human: finite, mortal, and fragile? What does it mean to be in relationship with others? What does it mean to be a sinner; to fail; to not always measure up even when I try my best? What does it mean to be beloved of God anyway? How do I live a human life of both failure and suffering, as well as great beauty and fantastic love? How do I clean my inner mirror so I reflect God's glory, illuminating the world?

This truthful inner reflection can be depressing business, certainly. It shatters the comfortable illusion of our own righteousness that we prefer. But before we become too demoralized, let us remember what Frederick Buechner also says about Lent: that “if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end.”

In the early days of the church, people didn't need reminders of mortality. Death was all around. But in our culture, we have the ability to sanitize and isolate death, affording us the luxury of keeping mortality at a distance. But our mortality is truth. And Ash Wednesday is one of the few days when the fact that we're going to die is said out loud and isn't related to illness. It simply is. But this is a hard message, so we ritualize it, in order to face mortality together.

On Ash Wednesday, the fast observance customarily includes the imposition of ashes. The ashes from the burning of palm fronds from the prior year's Palm Sunday are used to impose the sign of the cross upon our foreheads. This is done while the words of imposition are intoned: *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*

Like all great religious truths, the meaning of the ash mark is a paradox. On the one hand, the ash mark serves as a Memento mori – a reminder that you will die. Remember that you are dust.... Remember that you are mortal; remember that life is fragile; remember that there has been a time on earth before you and there will be a time after you. Remember that only God is God and that you are not. Remember that most of creation and life itself is out of your control. Remember that all that I really have is this life, this body, and this relationship with God and others. Remember that I am dust and to dust I shall return.

On the other hand, the ash mark reveals an inner reality. Through the marking of a cross on our foreheads with ashes, we also reveal the inner mark of Christ imposed upon us in our baptism. Notice that the ashes that are imposed actually trace the same cross that was marked on our foreheads in chrism at baptism. Through the medium of ashes – the physical representation of our mortality, fragility, and creatureliness – the inner glory that is the truth of who we are will be marked on our outer visage for all to see. This is how Transfiguration is connected to and indeed foreshadows Ash Wednesday.

¹ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2018/7/11/lent?rq=lent>

From deep within our creatureliness and imperfection, our inner glory – our spark of Godliness – will be revealed and we, too, will reflect God’s glory in the world. The ash mark brings into relief the Christ mark imposed upon our souls and serves as a reminder of whom you belong and to whom you will return. Think of the ash mark as a timeless identification marker – a name tag, if you will, that says, Hello, my name is Human, Child of God, marked as Christ’s Own Forever.

It is remarkable to me how easily we hide the inherent fragility of created life from ourselves. We love to act as if we are God and in complete control of things. I know that I do. But how often does nature, God, the fates, remind of us the real truth.

The weather provides us with ample opportunities to realize just how little control we have and just how fragile is our existence. If we thought we were having it tough in Northern Virginia the past few weeks, this has been nothing compared to what Texas has been suffering. For the twenty years I lived in Central Texas, the common joke was that we had two seasons: summer and not-summer, and not-summer didn’t last very long. What most people don’t realize is that every once in a while, in the not-summer, a polar vortex strikes and pushes crazy-cold weather from Canada into Central and South Texas.

This polar vortex flash-froze everything. Utility pipes are not buried as deeply there as the frost line is much closer to the surface, and thus they are much more susceptible to freezing and bursting during severe cold. The electricity grid in Texas is dependent on thermal generators, natural gas lines, and wind turbines that are not winterized, and which during an extreme vortex like is happening now have frozen up and are causing rolling blackouts. That the grid in Texas is essentially independent of both the Eastern and Western Interconnect grid cooperatives, means they did not have the option to borrow power from others. Over the past few days, this has meant that millions of Texans have had no heat, no power, and no water during frigid temperatures. This is especially a problem as most Texans don’t have fireplaces, decent winter clothing, or even snow shovels and ice scrapers. Everything in Texas is built for extreme heat, which makes it particularly susceptible to extreme cold.

Weather is a great leveler. \Hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, polar vortexes, and wildfires all puncture our self-induced delusions of control and independence. They are forces that remind us in stark and painful ways just how delicate and fragile is the balance that sustains life. They remind us that we are dust and to dust we shall return. And yet, as weather events – and pandemics – remind us of the fragility of life, our faith reminds us that God is present in every moment, even in the difficulties and struggles.

The ash mark is not only a sign of our mortality but also a sign of our connection and interdependence. It is an important indicator of our shared and common humanity. This mark connects our individual selves not only to all Christians but also to all humans and all of creation. The ash mark is our shared identity – the universal truth for everyone. In this way, it is also a reminder of our inter-dependence, that we depend on one another and on the earth that we share. We are dust and to dust we shall return – we are of the earth. Adam, the name of the first human being, comes from the Hebrew word for dirt. It is my hope that our service this evening will encourage the importance of strong relationships within this community and with our planet. Times like what we’ve been living through for the past year remind us of the blessings we are to one another.

This will be a different Ash Wednesday. We are virtually gathered rather than physically gathered. We will self-impose ashes upon our foreheads, or impose upon each other within our households. \We won’t bear our ash marks into the broader world, experiencing the discomfort of wearing our faith and our mortality so boldly upon our faces. But that is ok. While all of these aspects are valuable and formational, the most important part of Ash Wednesday is the **Invitation to a Holy Lent** that I will proclaim following this sermon. I ask you to listen closely. Open the ears of your heart to the ancient words of the church and the call to prepare yourself for the desert journey ahead for the next 40 days. This journey will be long – and it may feel that we’ve spent the

past 12 months in Lent – but it won't last forever. For, as Scott Gunn and Tim Schenck, the founders of Lent Madness wrote today, "Let us all pray that we might know the joy of God's saving help and the power of God's bountiful Spirit. By God's mighty grace, there is always Resurrection."²

Amen.

² <https://www.lentmadness.org/2021/02/always-resurrection/>