

Ash Wednesday Feb. 22, 2023

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit. Amen.**

On this Ash Wednesday, all around the globe, Christians are gathering in their places of worship to mark the beginning of the 40 days of Lent. These 40 days are intended to mirror or represent the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness, preparing for his public ministry.

And on this day, each person who comes forward to participate in the ancient ritual called "The Imposition of Ashes" will receive two things: An ashen smudge in the shape of a cross on their forehead, and a reminder spoken in their language, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

According to religious historians, this ritual has taken place every Ash Wednesday since at least the 8th century. This means that as we gather here tonight, we are connected to a vast, "mystic sweet communion" of those who have preceded us, who kept this ritual going and passed it on from generation to generation. And we stand with a "great cloud of witnesses" around the world today, all marked with the sign of an ashen cross.

So, I have a question for you tonight. When you hear these words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return," what do they mean to you? What kinds of thoughts or feelings do they stir up in you?

For me, the meaning of these words has evolved a lot over the course of my life. When I was a child, I thought the whole Ash Wednesday thing was kind of creepy. In our church there was this beautiful round, stained glass window in the peak above the altar. It depicted a white descending dove surrounded by bright blue and yellow faceted glass that shimmered in the sunlight. I loved that window. But the Ash Wednesday service was at night and the window looked black. You could barely make out the dove. That black window, the black smudge on my forehead and the thought of turning into dust all felt scary to me.

Somewhere in my teenage years, I heard that we are all made of stardust. And thinking that I was returning to stardust seemed a little better than just ordinary dust.

Then, somewhere in my 20's, I heard a Carlos Castaneda quote, "**Always live with death as your advisor.**" And that helped me think a little more metaphorically about the Ash Wednesday reminder. I began to think of it in the same vein as Psalm 90: "**So teach us to number our days that we might apply our hearts to wisdom.**" Or as the New English translation reads, "**So teach us to consider our mortality, so that we might live wisely.**" Life is brief. We don't have forever, so let's be sure we are spending our short lives on what really matters. And I stayed with that interpretation for a couple decades.

But then, somewhere in my 40's, I heard a cute little story that really stuck with me. I know you must be wondering how a cute little story could have anything to do with a day as solemn as Ash Wednesday, but this story definitely informed my current understanding of the Ash Wednesday reminder.

A young mom decided that it was time to take her 10-year-old son to his first Ash Wednesday service. On the way to church she explained that on Ash Wednesday everyone would go up to the front of the church, just like going to communion. But instead of receiving bread and wine, the pastor would use ashes to make the sign of the cross on each person's forehead, and say the words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

After church, on the way home, her son was very quiet. She asked, "What are you thinking about?"

He replied, "I don't know. Just thinking."

The following Saturday, her son was playing in his bedroom when she heard her son cry out, "Mom! Mom! Come here! Quick!"

She rushed to his room and saw him lying on his stomach, on the floor, looking under his bed.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"My car went under the bed and look what's there!" Her son pointed emphatically under the bed.

She got down on the floor and saw her son's toy car surrounded by all sorts of dust balls that had collected under the bed.

Her son explained in a hushed voice, "Do you see that? Someone's either coming or going!"

Coming or going... That pretty much sums up our lives, doesn't it? We come and we go. It all comes to pass. In the broadest sense we come from dust, and we return to dust. But in between our birth and our death, our lives are filled with innumerable comings and goings. And in all this coming and going, it's easy to become distracted and confused, to forget why we are here—to miss the point of this precious gift called our life.

Jesus does not want us to miss the point. In our gospel lesson for tonight, Jesus challenges us to examine our motives and our priorities in life. How are we spending our time and energy? If we look at how we spend our days, what does it reveal about what matters to us? Why do we do what we do? Are we living wisely?

Jesus reminds us that there is only one overarching point to life—one thing that marks a life wisely lived and that is this—staying connected to God—never forgetting this One from whom we came and to whom we shall return...

This One in whose image we were made...

This One in whom we live and move and have our being.

This One whom Jesus refers to as "our Father in heaven."

In fact, the singular purpose of all our religious sacraments, rituals and practices is to help us stay connected to our Father, who art in heaven. I love the way the Westminster Short Catechism sums it up. “The chief end of man is to love God and enjoy God forever.”

In this part of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shares three ways to help us strengthen this connection—to keep our awareness of God’s presence in our lives alive and vital. In the Roman Catholic church, these three ways have become known as the Three Pillars of Lenten Practice.

Lenten Practice Number 1: Prayer—In all the comings and goings of each day, Jesus tells us to remember to spend some time with God—to talk with God, to listen to God, to simply be with God, to commune with God. Jesus reminds us that our prayers are not supposed to be fancy or long, just from our hearts.

He reminds us that we don’t pray because we should, or to get what we want, or to impress people, or to get extra credit. That’s to miss the point. We pray because we want to be with God—to know God. We desire an authentic relationship with God. And praying is how we cultivate that kind of relationship. If we want a meaningful relationship with anyone, we need to talk with them, pay attention to them, and spend time with them. It is no different with God. And Jesus practiced what he preached. He was always going off to a quiet place to pray—to talk with our Father in heaven.

Lenten Practice Number 2: Almsgiving. We don’t use this word much anymore, but it means to give some of our time, money, and possessions to those who are less fortunate. Jesus reminds us that we are here not only to love God, we are here also to love our neighbor. Participating in things like Dining with Dignity is a form of Almsgiving. So is placing food in the basket at the back of the church for our Community Food Pantry...Or donating to the Episcopal Relief and Development Program...Or taking clothes and household items to places like the Betty Griffin Center...Or being generous when we pay those who work in the service or hospitality industries.

This kind of generous living needs to be a part of our coming and going each day. And Jesus reminds us of something very beautiful. Nothing can ever destroy or diminish this kind of giving. It not only helps to alleviate hunger, suffering and injustice and bring hope and even joy to those who are struggling. In sharing our treasure in this way, our hearts are changed. Jesus refers to this change as experiencing “abundant life” or “life that is life indeed.” When we give like this, we experience the joy of living in the flow of God’s blessing and grace. It is what the Psalmist is talking about in Psalm 23 when he writes, “My cup runneth over...My cup overflows!”

And finally, Lenten Practice Number 3: Fasting. Fasting begins by reflecting on what we have filled our lives with. And then asking ourselves: In our daily coming and going, are there habits, routines, possessions, or ways of being that distract us from the presence of God in our lives...or dull us to the call of God in our lives. In our coming and

going each day, which of our rhythms draw us closer to God and which ones pull us away?

Unfortunately, when it comes to fasting, we tend to focus on the giving up part, and forget that the purpose of fasting is to replace what we've given up with something that strengthens our connection with God and others. We are not just fasting **from** something. We are fasting **for** something—to offer ourselves—our time, our talents, or our treasure—to a higher calling, a higher purpose.

The Lenten practice of Fasting begins by sitting down with God and saying “**Lord, during this Lenten season I want to draw closer to you. Show me some ways I can do this.**” And trust me, the Holy Spirit will call some very specific ways to mind.

For example, as we reflect on our life, we may realize that we spend a lot of time complaining about things. We may feel led to fast from complaining. Each time we catch ourselves starting to complain, we stop and think of one thing we are thankful for. So we fast from **grumbling** in order to replace it with **gratitude**.

Or, let's say we realize that we spend several hours each day watching TV or bingeing on one Netflix series after another. (Not that any of us do that...) But, we may be led to fast from watching so much TV, and spend some of that time calling or visiting a friend who is lonely or struggling, or volunteering with an organization that brings hope to those in need or promotes justice, or reading something inspirational that reminds us of God's presence in our life and God's purpose for our life.

All of the scripture texts we heard tonight challenge us to ponder the practices that we have given ourselves to, and the practices to which God calls us. During this season of Lent, we are invited to reverently, lovingly and joyfully make room for God in our daily coming and going through these ancient Lenten practices of prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Lent is a time for remembering what really matters. It is a time for reflecting, rethinking, repenting, renewing our relationship with God, and reorienting our lives to make space for the things that are important to God.

Our Lenten journey begins tonight with an ashen smudge on our forehead and the ancient words: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” But there's something else we need to remember. Something we must never forget. That smudge on our forehead is in the shape of a cross—reminding us that we are God's dust—holy and beloved in his sight—sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. Amen.