

Ash Wednesday
March 1, 2017
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Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Psalm 103:8-14
2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday is a solemn occasion. But solemn, I hasten to add, is not the same as morbid.

Consider the ashes of Ash Wednesday, for starters: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” The words, making plain the symbolic significance of the ashes, are blunt.

The point would be clear, even if we didn’t add those words this night. I think of so many committal services at cemeteries or memorial gardens when I’ve intoned the words from our burial office: “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust” (BCP, p. 501). And here, on Ash Wednesday, the ashes are imposed, tracing out the form of a cross – which itself points ahead to Good Friday and the horrific execution of Jesus.

Now if that were all there was to say on the matter, Ash Wednesday would indeed be a morbid occasion. But there is, of course, so much more for us to say and for us to take in. Yes, here, at the beginning of Lent, we begin with ashes and the reminder of the cross of Jesus. But for two thousand years, the cross has been raised not to threaten us. Rather the cross stands for us as a sign of Christ’s victory over death. We do not celebrate Good Friday, after all, except as a prelude to Easter Sunday.

That juxtaposition of the deadly serious and the celebration runs through the whole of our observance of this day. That first reading from Joel “sound[s] the alarm,” warning us of a “day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!” But Joel only sounds the alarm because he remains hopeful that God is “gracious and merciful ... abounding in steadfast love.”

St. Paul writes of “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger ...” But that passage is shot through with hope – hope borne of his confidence in the grace of God, the love of God, the power of God.

In our gospel reading this evening, Jesus warns us not to invest ourselves in things external to us – things that are consumed and corroded by “moth and rust,” things that can be snatched away from us by thieves and time. His point is to exhort us to trust the God who knows us inside and out, the God who sees into the depths of who we are and longs to be a blessing to us.

Later this evening, I’ll invite you to observe a holy Lent. And then ashes will be imposed. And we’ll kneel together (as we are able) to recite an ancient penitential psalm together and we’ll confess our sins as part of a litany of penitence. But here, too, I want to make the point that we only say these prayers of confession and penitence because they’re immediately followed by absolution. If groveling were all we did tonight, then this would indeed be a morbid occasion.

Some of you will remember Stephen Covey's popular book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. The second of his seven habits was "to begin with the end in mind." Applying his logic to this night, I suggest you begin this night with Easter in mind. As you give thought to what you want to do this year, consider what would make it easier for you to celebrate Easter at the end. If you still wonder what you'll give up – or what you'll take on – for Lent, ask yourself what might need to die to make room for new life to rise up ... for yourself or another.

And if you haven't come up with anything yet, I'll make a plug for our "Thursdays at Trinity" Lenten program. Now you can come for the whole of the evening's activities or you can pick and choose to come for any part of the evening, but it may help you to know that I chose the book for our Lenten study with Easter in mind. The book is called *Uncommon Gratitude: Alleluia For All That Is*. That's an Easter word, of course: "alleluia." We're not supposed to say "alleluia" in Lent, but my hope is that the authors, Rowan Williams and Joan Chittester, will help us discover "alleluia" as a way to live, not merely a word we say (or keep ourselves from saying). One reviewer describes the book this way; she says it's an ...

... inspiring and timely message of hope in the midst of so much fear and violence. A faith-filled and prophetic perspective on the dark and hurting spaces in our world and lives. We are both invited and challenged to pick up our pieces, dry our tears, shake ourselves down, and continue the journey with renewed hope and joy. Alleluia indeed.

But my point is not simply to recommend that we read and talk about a book together. My point, I want to emphasize, is for us to begin Lent with Easter in mind.

Ash Wednesday is, as I said, a solemn occasion. But for at least the reasons I've just tried to explain, I hope we don't think of it as morbid. We are gathered here this evening on this solemn occasion to make a right beginning of a holy season that prepares us for new life at Easter.

And with that in mind, I'll offer a word of encouragement for you to consider. It's nothing you need to do tonight, just something I want you to know ... something you might anticipate. I want to be clear to say that I hope you'll be back here for the Great Vigil of Easter on Easter Eve. On that night, I'm going to follow up on an idea suggested by Richard Rohr in his book *Immortal Diamond*. If you come forward this night with great solemnity to be signed with ashes on your forehead, I hope you do so with the resolve to come forward on Easter Eve to be splashed with baptismal waters and anointed with holy oil.

Here on Ash Wednesday, I offer the solemn reminder: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." But I only do so tonight in order to be able to offer its solemn counterpart on Easter: "Remember that you are God's beloved, and to Love you will return."

It's a solemn and sacred thing we do this night, but nothing morbid; it's simply the prelude to, and a preparation for, what God intends for us on the other side of these forty days. If we can hold on to that reminder throughout our Lenten fasts, then we will indeed observe a holy Lent.