

On Ash Wednesday, God invites us closer  
Sermon preached at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA  
by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, February 17, 2021  
Ash Wednesday, Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21  
*Readings quoted amply below*

This year, we've been staying inside a lot. At my house, we have a "bonus room" over the garage, and in a corner of the bonus room is the makeshift desk where I've been working for eleven months. I can't call it a "man cave" because it is not nearly so noble. But my body is starting to conform to the shape of the chair at that desk, since I spend over 12 hours a day in that room sometimes.

I've noticed that the bonus room collects a lot more dust than it used to. Have you noticed that in your homes? The more time with people in the room, the more dust we leave behind. Dust, of course comes from us. As our skin renews its tissues, it sheds the dead cells from the surface, and these dead cells collect in dust on the floors and tables, they ball up into dust bunnies under beds and behind computers. Dust is evidence of human presence, leaving a trail of what is dying from us. Dust is us without the breath of life from the spirit of God. We are dust. We are dust and to dust we shall return.

Ash Wednesday shines a light on a similar kind of renewal to our shedding of dust and growth of new skin. Lent is about shedding what is dead to make room for new life. We turn away from those things that divide us from God, divide us from each other, and divide each of us down the middle. And we turn to God to forgive us, to renew us, to restore us to wholeness, and to draw us closer to God.

While our skin sheds and renews naturally, our spiritual lives take more intentionality for renewal. The dust of our mortality is more than skin deep. We must look at ourselves honestly and fully, recognizing those parts of us that oppose God and God's will for us. We must let go of those things—in fact we must reject those things that oppose God and God's will. We call these things sin, and this process of renewal we call penitence. Penitence leads us to embracing the grace of God, God's forgiveness and God's Holy Spirit who can create in us a clean heart. On Ash Wednesday, God invites us closer.

Note that this process is not a kind of spiritual self-help strategy. In fact, relying on the self is most of what got us into this mess. How can dust breathe life into dust? But God reaches out to us in love to forgive and restore us and renew us. This is the hope and promise of walking with Jesus in Lent. Lent is about the cycle of penitence: Confession, repentance, forgiveness, amendment of life, and finally, reconciliation.

Confession is where we acknowledge our mortality, the brokenness of our human nature, and the need we have for God's forgiveness and healing and empowerment to lead a new life. Then turning from sin and toward God is what we call repentance. Confession and Repentance are hard but hopeful steps for us because of the promise of God's forgiveness. God the Holy Spirit empowers us to amend our lives, to walk more closely with God and with each other. This is the ultimate aim of the cycle of penitence: reconciliation. On Ash Wednesday, God invites us closer.

Ash Wednesday is becoming an interesting occasion. I'm starting to notice an odd trend in how people think of the ashes of Ash Wednesday. It seems that some folks think of ashes as a kind of special blessing, some kind of magic dust that accrues some sort of benefit to the one whose forehead is scraped with them. Ashes, however, are not some sort of blessing, rather they are a sign of a curse. Not that we're cursing people on Ash Wednesday, but we impose ashes as a sign of sorrow for our sinfulness and mortality, not of our blessing. Ashes are a helpful sign to ourselves of the somber reality of sin and death. Ashes are an important step in that cycle of penitence: if we miss the reality of our dire situation, we miss the renewal God offers. But the ashes themselves are secondary to the penitence they are supposed to express.

In the first parish I served, I learned to know several other Christian clergy in the area. On Ash Wednesday one year, we invited our congregations to join together in a common Ash Wednesday service. This was held at the Lutheran church in town. I remember how a member of my congregation was irate that she would have to go to the Lutheran church for "her ashes." "I want the real thing!" she said. "I want my Episcopalian ashes!" I tried to explain to her that we are in communion with the Lutheran church, but perhaps I just reinforced her sense of the magic of ashes. No, ashes are a right beginning to our repentance and reconciliation with God. But ashes are not a kind of magic dust.

What does God think of ashes? Ashes and sackcloth and tearing one's clothing were signs of sorrow and penitence. They were signs of mourning: mourning for someone's death, and mourning in sorrow while pleading for God's mercy. So the prophets call the proud people to put on sackcloth and ashes, to repent of their pride and turn back toward God. "*Call a solemn assembly,*" Joel writes, "*gather the people,*" "*with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*"

This is God inviting us closer. This is God's call to repentance on the road to reconciliation with his steadfast love. Ashes were a sign of this repentance, like tearing one's clothes or wearing sackcloth. These are signs of the penitence that God appreciates. But God also knows that these outward signs can distract us from the inward process of repentance and reconciliation.

Listen to Jesus' words in the Gospel Reading for Ash Wednesday: *Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.... And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."*

On Ash Wednesday, Jesus invites us to a penitence of our hearts and our actions, not our appearance. On Ash Wednesday, God invites us closer.

This year, COVID has changed so much of how we worship together. Though the pandemic is improving, new cases are still high in our area. Today, we will not impose ashes directly on the

foreheads of those who participate. Instead, Mother Elisa, our celebrant for today, will impose ashes on her forehead on behalf of the rest of us, as a sign of our community's mortality and need for repentance. Each of us present will walk up to her as we might in other years. She will hold out her thumb, still dark from the ashes, and make the sign of the cross without touching us. She will tell each of us the words we hear each year: "remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

When we go from here, or for those participating at home, we will not bear the visual sign of our mortality, our sinfulness, and our need for repentance. Rather, following Jesus' command, we will engage our sinfulness in our own hearts and actions, presenting to God rather, a humble and contrite heart, regardless of what we or others see on our foreheads. As Joel writes: "*rend your hearts and not your garments.*" For Ash Wednesday is not an invitation to display our piety. On Ash Wednesday, God invites us closer.

Perhaps this trend I've noticed about the popularity of ashes can be seen in "ashes to go." This is the practice of some who take ashes to bus stops and train stations and street corners so that people can "get their ashes." I certainly admire the spirit of evangelism to go out into the world. But the message of "ashes to go" seems a bit stunted to me. Without the full experience of the Ash Wednesday liturgy the message is simply: "you're a sinner and you're going to die. Good luck with that!" Instead, the fullness of Ash Wednesday is found not only in ashes, but in hearing God's word in scripture, in turning toward God in the confession and absolution, in the nourishment of the Eucharist and in the call to a holy Lent that points to Easter. The full experience of Ash Wednesday is the full experience of penitence and restoration at God's hands. There is more to Ash Wednesday than ashes.

Remember that ecumenical Ash Wednesday service I did with my Lutheran friend and our other pastor friends? Rich Moore, the Lutheran pastor, had us do something different at the end of the service. In keeping with Jesus' teaching, and in keeping with the full theology of Lent and Easter, as we walked out, we washed our foreheads in holy water from the font. We used the waters of Baptism to wash away that sign of sin and death. That year, on each Wednesday in Lent, we invited our congregations to a dinner and class taught by each of the several pastors involved. Then, on the Saturday night before Easter, we gathered at the Episcopal Church for the Great Vigil of Easter. And at the renewal of Baptismal vows, we processed back to the font, and Rich and I took holy water from the font and made the sign of the cross on each person's forehead, saying "Remember your Baptism."

On Ash Wednesday, God invites us closer. Ash Wednesday is the beginning of a season that ends in Easter—that ends in the grace of the resurrection of Jesus and the new life he brings us. This Ash Wednesday, even without ashes on our foreheads, let us take Lent seriously—the hard parts and the hopeful parts. Let us rend our hearts and not our garments, let us wrestle with our sins before God and open more of ourselves to God's transforming grace. And thus prepared, let us celebrate with greater joy the embrace of God's reconciliation at Easter. On Ash Wednesday, God invites us closer.