



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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ASH WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6, 2019, NOON SERVICE  
ISAIAH 58:1-12; PSALM 103: 8-14; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20B-6:10; MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21

## 12:17PM

**Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21** [*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.*

*"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*"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.*

*"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*]

Several years ago, I was New York City on an Ash Wednesday. Even though I was traveling, there was this longing to be in church that day. Deep inside, I knew that without the invitation to a Holy Lent, some

important part of the paschal mystery would be missing. Without the ashes, I'd feel like I'd taken a shortcut to Easter that would end up cheating me and Jesus in some kind of profound way.

So after a quick check of the internet, I found the nearest church and headed out. After finding the front door to the church (which was harder to do than it sounds) and then figuring out to unlock the pew box (which is a real thing on the East Coast), I finally settled in. Then, at exactly noon, the priest offered the strangest prelude I have ever heard. In a monotone voice, he said, "Ashes will be imposed in approximately 17 minutes." Then, he charged down the aisle with the rest of the altar party, and we began.

17 minutes, I thought. How precise. Apparently, it was going to be one of those Lent's. The kind where everything is perfectly scheduled...over-scheduled really...and one where the schedule takes precedence over the heart of the matter. What had I done? What did this ominous start to Lent portend for the rest of the journey?

Today does mark a significant shift in the practices of faith for Christians. Even before the smells of last night's feast can clear the air, we are catapulted into the season of Lent. Ash Wednesday begins a special 40 day practice of spiritual devotion and self-denial. In addition, in the Episcopal tradition, Ash Wednesday is one of two days designated for fasting. (The other is Good Friday.) While we will engage in these special acts of devotion, I wonder why. What brings each of us here

today? What is it that you seek in this holy place during this holy season?

Jesus minces no words when it comes to our acts of piety. Three times in today's gospel, he warns his disciples not to be hypocrites. Again, in the waning days of his life, Jesus will call out the religious leaders of his day for being hypocrites. Strong words for holy people. But holy people, of all people, are the ones who commit to follow God's ways ahead of their own. Right?! And shouldn't those same holy people be able to bear honest feedback about themselves with grace and dignity? Theoretically anyway?

Jesus wants us to understand that a life of faith is about more than playing the part. Unless the heart is changed and our lives with it, we are really just calling it in. While the Greek text uses a word that sounds like "hypocrite," the underlying Greek means something more. When Jesus warns against hypocrisy, he's also warning us against acting the part rather than living the part with all our being. I, for one, find his words especially challenging as I prepare to have ashes publicly smeared on my head.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, “sin is our only hope.”<sup>1</sup> It is provocative, this idea of sin as the path to salvation. Our culture tells us that sin is bad. Sin is something to be avoided and certainly not something to be publicly acknowledged. Yet, denying sin’s reality is not an honest assessment of the human condition. Nor does that denial allow healing to happen.

We do screw up, sometimes with catastrophic consequences, but that’s also how we learn. Taylor says, “sin is our only hope because it’s the recognition that something is wrong.” That recognition is the first step toward setting ourselves and the world right again.<sup>2</sup> “Sin is our only hope” she says, “because it is the fire alarm that wakes us up to the possibility of repentance.”<sup>3</sup> Sin is also the way we come to know the full measure of God’s mercy and care for us.

In a few minutes, ashes will be given out. You will be invited to come forward and stand face to face with one of the priests. Words will be offered and you will be given something. It’s strange how up to that point in the service, the distribution of ashes and Holy Communion are quite similar. Unlike the Eucharist though, what will be offered to you is not Christ’s body. Instead, your own

mortality will be handed back to you. Dust of the earth will be scratched onto your head. Flecks of carbon will dribble onto your nose or chin as a cross is etched into your forehead. Let those ashes fall on you. It is part of the great undoing that happens this day. After you return to your pew, together, we will confess our sins to God. The language will be stark, all-encompassing, and unequivocal. That, too, is part of the great unraveling that happens this day.

What you do after that will be your choice. You could decide that all this is just an act done on a single day. You could decide that the words of the confession are only that...beautiful words to mumble before your next meeting or to hide behind because that’s safer than delving into your sins. Or this could be the alarm bell that wakes you up and calls you into new life. You get to decide.

While you decide, know this. God already has decided. God already knows everything about us. God also knows the roles we have been created to fulfill. We were cast into those roles before there was time. Our names will remain tied to those roles when all that’s left is eternal time.

God says to Jesus, “You are my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” God says to each of

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Boston, MA: Crowley Publications, 2000), 41.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 59.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 67.

us, you, too, are my beloved. With you, I am also well pleased. No acting is needed to convince God of this reality. This belovedness, your belovedness before God, is who you have been created to be. That's what God has decided. If you do nothing else in the next 40 days, let those ashes on your forehead testify to that truth. Trust it, and stake your life on God's promise to us.

But if you hunger for more, also know this. God longs for us to respond in kind. Through Jesus, we are invited to be a partner with God. With Jesus, we are called to share in the repair and renewal of ourselves and of this world. That's what penance is. That's what the special devotions of Lent are about, this

healing and renewal of our lives and the world. ...and that work happens everyday, not just today or during a liturgical season. That's what our faith is about.

Nothing is lost in God's creation. God says, "out of the dust I have formed you. Out of the dust of your own existence I will form something new." Even the dust smudged on our foreheads will yield something new, if we trust that. When you come forward for ashes, embrace your mortal nature. And then remember, your mortality is not your end. Instead, it is another beginning. That's how resurrection begins.



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