



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2021

ISAIAH 58:1-12; PSALM 103:8-14; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20b-6:10; MATTHEW 6:1-6,16-21

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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."]*

This past year, a consistent topic of pandemic conversation has been the strangeness of time. It can be challenging to tell the difference between one day and the next. Some weeks go by in a flash and others get stuck in place. We have all tried mightily to create a new rhythm of life, one that

integrates the many losses and griefs of COVID time but also holds space for new experiences and learning.

Still, it may feel to you that we've already been in Lent for quite a while, with plenty of time for self-examination and facing difficult truths, all the while abstaining from so many

things that bring pleasure. Many enter this season of Lent weary and vulnerable, acutely aware of our limitations and neediness. And so, this is where our loving God meets us today, exactly as we are.

The invitation to a holy Lent, as always, is a call to repentance and renewal. *Our* work is repentance and out of that, *God* brings renewal.

Repentance is surely a serious undertaking, but it is not a fearful one. We are meant to take compassionate stock of our spiritual, emotional and material lives, acknowledging the large and small ways we have fallen short, and turning toward God's mercy with a desire for change. We seek to return to our truest selves, knowing that is where God dwells within us.

Part of repentance is letting go of the habits of mind and daily life that trap us – like the numbing and distracting we do to avoid discomfort, or the negative self-conceptions that paralyze us. We need to turn away from them and instead embrace something liberating.

So consider exploring new spiritual practices in the coming weeks. Along with others in the Saint Mark's community, you can:

- Adopt a brief Lenten service of prayer in the evening before your meal or before you go to bed.
- Show up for morning or evening prayer over Zoom.
- Create cloth banners that name your needs and desires before God and join them with those of the broader community.
- Learn from the African American mystic and activist Howard Thurman.

More information on all of these opportunities is available on the website. It is a way to go deeper in your spiritual journey alongside your brothers and sisters in Christ. It may be your practice to give something up for Lent, but you're also encouraged take on something new – something fresh and creative -- to feed your spirit.

We will pray the litany of penitence today to stir up the process of repentance and begin our honest assessment of what brings love, freedom, and peace in our lives and what does not. It's like gardening for the soul, as winter gives way to early spring. We have to

clear the dead leaves, assess the soil, and amend it with compost and nutrients in order to support the life that is already humming and help it flourish.

This year, the Lenten invitation to repentance and renewal is familiar, but the way we observe Ash Wednesday is not. Many of you long to be here in the nave together, experiencing the gravity of the prayers and music firsthand and receiving ashes imprinted on your forehead. I want to assure you -- although we gather differently this year, the deep meaning of the Ash Wednesday remains. Repentance, mortality, grief over our own brokenness and that of the world. All of this is communicated through the imposition of ashes and goes back to biblical symbolism.

Some history: in the early church, ashes were primarily imposed on converts and penitents, people who were joining or returning to the community. Sometimes they even donned a sackcloth garment on Ash Wednesday. By the eleventh century everyone received ashes at the start of Lent, but not by marking the forehead. Instead, ashes were sprinkled on the tops of people's heads, bringing to mind the handfuls of dirt

that are sprinkled on a newly buried coffin. It was a visceral reminder of inevitable mortality.

Years later monks started the practice of making a sign of the cross with ashes, but not on their foreheads. They put it on their tonsures, that cleanshaven spot on the top of their heads.

So their faces were clean, aligning with Jesus' direction today to make one's fasting and penitence private.¹ But most Christians continued to receive ashes sprinkled on their heads for centuries. Gradually, the practice turned to marking a person's forehead, maybe as people wanted to observe Ash Wednesday piety but also keep their hair and hats clean.

So although new to us, our observance of Ash Wednesday this year adapts and reclaims past practices. In just a few moments, we will hear the invitation to observance of a holy Lent. After the presider prays over the ashes here, you are invited to take ashes of your own or dirt from outside

¹ Neil Alexander: <https://anglicanmusicians.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Alexander-A Note on Ash Wednesday.pdf?v=5>

and impose them on yourself or with others in your household. You can sprinkle them on the top of the head or make a sign of the cross on the forehead.

Listen carefully as you repeat the words “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

We trust that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

And we are mortal. The reality and unpredictability of death was our constant companion this year and we enter Lent with

a deeper understanding of our frailties and our hunger for life. That is a fertile place to be on Ash Wednesday.

St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “See, now is the time; now is the day for healing! Don’t delay!”²

Let us begin a holy Lent.

² 2 Cor 6:2b, my paraphrase of Eugene Peterson’s translation in The Message.

