

Ash Wednesday, March 2, 2022

Mercy in Ashes

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We don't encounter ashes much in contemporary society. We live in a culture that sanitizes everything. Anything unsightly—such as ashes—has been removed from view. At one time ash trays were ubiquitous, but now they are out of sight. Even among those who smoke, many have switched to e-cigarettes and vaping which produce no ashes. I expect that you have to deal with ashes only if you have a wood-burning fireplace. But now even that is commonly replaced with gas-burning fireplaces. So rarely in our hygienic lives do we engage with ashes.

But one day each year we encounter ashes. We engage them up close and personal. We don ashes on our faces. They visibly mark our foreheads. Of course, that day is today. That day is Ash Wednesday.

I. The Symbol of Repentance: Ashes

Christians have imposed ashes on themselves for centuries as a gesture of humility and penitence. We even read about this in the Bible. For example, Job abased himself and repented “in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6). Daniel “pleaded with God in prayer, fasting, sackcloth, and ashes” (Daniel 9:3). We are told in the book of Esther that the entire Jewish people fasted and wore ashes in their time of lamentation (Esther 4:1-3). The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel summoned their hearers to repent with ashes. Jeremiah calls out: “O my people, put on sackcloth and roll in ashes!” (Jeremiah 6:26). Jesus Christ himself refers to repentance with sackcloth and ashes (Matthew 11:21; Luke 10:13). All of these biblical references associate the sign of ashes with repentance. So also on this Ash Wednesday, this solemn penitential day, ashes remind us of the need for repentance.

Why are ashes a symbol of repentance? First of all, to get down into the dust and ashes means to humble yourself, to “go low” in a stance of humility before God. In repentance we humble ourselves before God. Second, ashes are dirty, and so they remind us of the filth of our sin. Repentance acknowledges the sin that clings to us like dirt. Third, ashes are associated with death, which is the penalty for sin. After humanity's first sin, God

condemned sinners to death by saying: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). The words “ashes to ashes, dust to dust” are spoken at the occasion of many burials. So when we repent, we confess that we deserve death for our transgressions.

II. The Reason for Repentance: Our Sin

That brings us to a second and even more important question: Why should we repent? The biblical text for today’s sermon tells us why. Joel 2:12-13 reads: “‘Yet even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.’ Return to the Lord, your God.” Two times in this text the Lord calls us to return—“return to me with all your heart ... return to the Lord.” The word translated as “return” here is frequently translated as “repent.” It literally means to turn, to turn from sin to God. It means to make a 180-degree reversal. And the call to turn—to return, to repent—is addressed not to pagans, but to God’s people. It is addressed to us!

Why should we turn? Why should we repent? It is because we are sinful. We are continually sinning. Our epistle reading makes that clear. It states: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). A man prayed these words to God: “Lord, today I haven’t lied, gossiped, been unkind or lost my temper. I haven’t had an impure thought or selfish motive. [pause] But now it is time for me to get out of bed.” In other words, it won’t be long after arising from sleep that he will commit sin. We also are quickly dirtied with sin at the beginning of each day. The mark of sin is constantly on us. And the penalty of death is continually before us. So the first reason we repent is because we are filthy with sin.

III. The Reason for Repentance: God’s Mercy

The second reason we repent is because God is merciful. Verse 13 of our text states: “Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.” We repent in order to receive God’s mercy. This Lenten series revolves around the theme of divine mercy. Lent is a season in which we take a look at our lives in view of God’s mercy toward us in the sacrifice of his Son for us on the cross.

Jesus Christ came to this sin-filled world and took upon himself the filth of our sin. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says that God made Christ “to be sin who knew

no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Jesus suffered and died to pay the penalty of your sin. He lay in the dust and ashes of death for you. All this he did so that you can be forgiven of your sin, so that you may be washed clean of your spiritual filth. God promises us: “The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. . . . If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:7, 9).

This is why the imposition of ashes today is made in the sign of the cross. The pastor places ashes on your forehead with horizontal and vertical strokes forming the image of the cross. This declares to us that we have been forgiven by Christ the crucified. It attests to the mercy of God. We are marked with the sign of the cross to remind us of our baptisms when we first received God’s mercy. We are marked with the cross to witness to our world that God’s mercies are new every day as we live in repentant faith.

IV. The Response of Repentance: Today and Continually

So we repent. We repent today, on Ash Wednesday. We repent during the next forty days, the season of Lent. And we repent every day of our lives. We do so in view of God’s mercy as repentance and the forgiveness of sin become a permanent mark in our lives.

A pastor in a rural community was preparing for the Ash Wednesday service when he remembered that he had not made ashes for that year. It was his tradition to gather some palm branches from the previous year’s Palm Sunday celebration and burn them into ashes for use in the next Ash Wednesday rite. But he had forgotten to do this. So he decided to do what he thought would be the next best thing. Out of the brush pile behind the church building he pulled the Christmas tree that was now dried out. He cut some of the pine branches of it off and burnt them into ashes. When Ash Wednesday arrived, this pastor used these ashes to mark the foreheads of his parishioners.

Later that evening he received a phone call from an angry member. This person complained that she could not wash the mark of the ashes from her forehead. The mark was indelible. So the pastor tried to rinse the ashes from his own forehead, but a mark remained on him as well. In fact, the mark of the cross on the foreheads of all those who had received ashes remained visible for several days after Ash Wednesday. Only over time and

repeated washings did the mark disappear. What had happened? Apparently the pine branches from the Christmas tree had originally been sprayed with a dye to preserve the color. The chemical elements of the dye remained in the ashes and so stained the skin of the people who received those ashes imposed upon their foreheads.

The parishioners were understandably irritated by the semi-permanent stain on their foreheads. But a lesson could be taken from this mishap. The unintended but important message arising from this incident was that repentance is not for one day only. It is to be a permanent mark on our lives. And the cross—the symbol of God’s mercy—is to be visible in our lives at all times.

On this Ash Wednesday, and during this Lenten season, and in every day, may repentance be a permanent mark of our lives. Then we will live a penitential life in view of God’s mercy. Amen.

Sermon Series: In View of God’s Mercy – A Series of Services for the Season of Lent
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