

St. Paul's, Concord
March 6, 2019
Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:1-2,12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21
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For many years, the imposition of ashes was viewed as a distinctly Catholic practice, with an Ash Wednesday liturgy instituted in the 10th century in the Roman Church, and the call to distribute ashes added by Pope Urban II in the 11th century. Over the years the Anglican Church had some ambivalence about the use of ashes, but Ash Wednesday liturgy has been a part of our Books of Common Prayer since 1549 – and, as you can see, since our current prayer book was published in 1979, that liturgy includes the blessing and imposition of ashes.

Today some form of celebration of Ash Wednesday takes place in a wide range of Protestant churches – often accompanied by Holy Eucharist – with the clergy and the people receiving the mark of ashes on their foreheads and hearing the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” In fact, the practice has become so widespread across religious traditions, that when we offer “Ashes to Go” on Main Street, we get plenty of takers from the passers-by!

So why ashes? There are two reasons.

First, the Book of Genesis tells us that the words, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” were spoken by God to Adam and Eve, after they had sinned for the first time. (Genesis 3:19) Ash Wednesday is the first day of the season of Lent, a time when, as part of our preparation for Easter, we focus on repentance of our sins and ask God, in the words of the Psalmist, to create a new heart, and to renew a right spirit within us.

We begin every service during Lent with the Penitential Order, and today's liturgy in particular emphasizes our awareness of our sinfulness.

Since the earliest centuries, Christians have demonstrated repentance of sins by sprinkling ashes on their body. There are numerous mentions throughout Scripture of people dressing in sackcloth and ashes – symbols of the utter humility in which we ask God to forgive us. Then, as ashes became central to the liturgy that marks the beginning of Lent, the placing of them became more intentional – the sign of the cross on our forehead.

Every time we gather for worship, we say the prayer of confession together. It's an important mark of our Episcopal tradition that we recognize that we are *all* in need of God's forgiveness on a regular basis. As our baptismal promises make clear, it's *whenever* we fall into sin, not if by some slight chance it should happen! The imposition of ashes on this holy Wednesday acknowledges the same truth: we are *all* in need of repentance and we all receive the same mark as a sign of that need.

We're in this together – and how liberating it is to acknowledge openly to each other, and to God, our weakness and our sinfulness. That's not always easy to do in a society that is quick to judge.

The second reason for ashes on Ash Wednesday, is our society's resistance to the idea of death. Frankly, most people don't want to think about it at all, instead putting all their energy into a fruitless quest for eternal youth. We just don't feel comfortable facing our mortality.

Ash Wednesday *forces* us to face our mortality. As we receive the mark on our forehead, we hear that unmistakable reminder that we came from dust and we will return to dust, and there isn't a thing we can do about it!

There's a sense of liberation in acknowledging together that we're all sinful people in need of forgiveness – and it's equally liberating to acknowledge together that we won't live on this earth forever. After all, for us it isn't a morbid preoccupation with death. We can be utterly realistic and fearless about the temporary nature of this physical life because we know that it is only the beginning. We can share this common reminder of our mortality, this mark of the dust we'll become, because we have eternal life to look forward to.

And because of the double certainty – that our sins will be forgiven and that our life will not end in death – Ash Wednesday doesn't have to fill us with gloom. Instead it's an occasion for celebration – for giving thanks for God's unending, unconditional love. And it's a time of re-commitment – as we enter this Lenten season determined to make something new of our life of faith.

Our liturgical color becomes more somber in this holy season, and our flowers are replaced by bare twigs – more symbolism. We're giving ourselves space and time, without distractions, to concentrate on receiving the new heart and the right spirit we need as we strive to be the people God created us to be.

But there's no reason for *us* to be somber or lifeless. After all, the mark on our foreheads isn't just a smudge, it's the sign of the cross, a symbol that assures us of our salvation and the promise of Resurrection. Long after these traces of ash have been wiped away, their significance still remains.

We are beloved children of a God who delights in bestowing forgiveness and helping us find newness of life. And – even as we recognize the transience of this life – we are Resurrection people who share with Christ a glorious victory over death