

"The Fresh Ember Among The Dying Ashes" Matthew 6:1-21 Ash
Wednesday 2024

Friends, may grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Well, here we are again! Today we enter into a new season of Lent. Although the church calendar rolls over to a new year with Advent, to me there's something about Lent that feels like a new beginning.

I think a lot of it is the time of year, with spring approaching. The word "Lent" actually comes from the Anglo-Saxon word "lencten." It means "lengthen" and is connected to the lengthening of days with spring's approach.

The season lasts 40 days, not including the Sundays within Lent. Sunday is always a little day of resurrection. 40 days has biblical significance. It rained for 40 days and 40 nights when Noah was in the ark. Moses stayed on the top of Mount Sinai for 40 days. And before he launched his ministry, Jesus retreated to the wilderness and fasted for 40 days. Then he was tempted by Satan.

So a 40 day season is a timely one. Lent has always been a season of preparation. It's a revival period. It's meant to stir up the embers of our faith, to rekindle the flames of our devotion and hope in the Lord.

Traditionally, Lent is associated with practices to stimulate and energize our faith. It's why we traditionally hold these extra mid-week worship opportunities during the Wednesdays in Lent. It's also observed by devotional readings, prayer and acts such as fasting and almsgiving.

I think there's a tendency to think that we should be extremely sober and penitent during the season of Lent. But our reading today from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount would suggest otherwise:

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“When you fast, don’t look dismal, like the hypocrites. They disfigure their faces so as to show others that they’re fasting.”

Jesus instructs us, “When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face so that your fasting won’t be seen by others, but only your Father in heaven.”

Jesus’ words here, spoken in the context of Ash Wednesday, suggest that this season isn’t meant to be one filled with artificial somberness or pained lament.

No, these acts are meant to stir up faith, to kindle something new within. It’s a season of revival.

Lent begins with the observation of Ash Wednesday. We mark our foreheads with a smudge of ashes. While we’re marked, we hear sobering words pronounced: “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Ash Wednesday calls us to remember our mortality. We are finite creatures! Our days are numbered. One day, we all will die.

Remembering that we are dust helps us to keep our perspective in balance. How often do we take tomorrow for granted? We assume that we naturally have numerous days ahead of us. We make plans for months or even years in advance. But these ashes on our forehead remind us that we have no such guarantee. We receive life one day at a time and we never know when our final day may come.

As one who has marked people with ashes and uttered these words, there is no discrimination. You see the full spectrum, from new born babies to 90-year olds. The words are pronounced to the hale and hearty and those with frail and compromised health. Marking the forehead of a toddler is a sobering thing, it feels wildly inappropriate.

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The most profound experience I had during the imposition of ashes occurred several years ago back in Edmonton. A woman in a that congregation was suffering from a terminal disease. I'll call her Catherine. I could see that Catherine and her family were coming down the aisle towards me. As her family members came forward one at a time, the expression on their faces was marked by an obvious sorrow. They told the story of a family who felt the specter of death looming over their home. Each one of them wore a pallor of sorrow.

But then Catherine brought up the rear of her family. And she stepped forward with a noticeable eagerness. She dearly wanted to receive the ashes! And then I spoke the words which were so evidently true: "Catherine, remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." Her face beamed with a radiance I'll never forget.

Catherine witnessed to me the true meaning of this ritual. For we mark these ashes in the form of a cross. And in that cross, there is reason to hope. Catherine knew in a very personal way that her remaining days on this earth were finite.

But she also knew that there is more, there is life beyond this realm, and the ashen cross on her forehead marked that understanding. The cold ashes spoke of the promise of life anew. There were fresh embers waiting to explode into new life, a life without end.

And so today we receive this paradoxical mark on our brow. It speaks both of death and also of life. In the ashes, we remember we are dust. But in the cross, we look to the resurrection opened to us through that Easter morning when our Lord stepped from his grave into the light of the new day.