



Sermon for Ash Wednesday
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
February 26, 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Unless you're cleaning out your wood-burning fireplace you probably don't interact much with ashes on a regular basis. I happen to have a gas fireplace so I don't see many ashes of any kind – except this one time each year, on Ash Wednesday. This service, therefore, feels a little bit odd to us. We have to remember each year how we do it and, I think, we ought to pause to remember why as well.

Ashes were a much more common part of life 3,000 years ago, when the word of God to Israel began to be committed to writing to become what we know today as the Holy Scriptures. Everyone heated, cooked, and lit their homes with wood and ashes were around all the time. For reasons lost to the mists of anthropological history, ashes came to be associated in ancient times with three themes: submission, repentance, and grief. So, if we look to the Hebrew scriptures we find people placing ashes on their heads as a sign of surrender and submission to powerful kings, as a sign of repentance before God and their community, and as a sign of grief in times of great loss.

Submission, repentance, and grief are all themes of our Lenten discipline that begins today. We continue, all these centuries later, to use ashes because our scriptures give them to us as a symbol of these themes.

Submission is probably the hardest for us. We live in an age and a culture of personal freedom and independence. We're Americans – no one tells us what to do! Until, of course, we get pulled over for speeding or the time comes to pay our taxes. The Kingdom of God, however, is not a democratic-republic. It is a monarchy ruled by Christ the King and for all of us there comes a time – or times – in life when we must say to Christ “not my will, but yours be done, O Lord.” The ashes of Lent are our reminder of this submission.

Repentance is probably the theme we associate most closely with Lent. As the Holy Spirit guides us we seek to see those areas of our lives where we might turn from something we have been doing and seek a better path – a path that is healthier for ourselves, or for those we love, or for our relationship with God. This often

means giving something up for Lent but it can also mean adding something into our lives for Lent – some new way of being generous, of caring for others, or deepening our relationship with Christ. The ashes are our reminder of this repentance.

Finally, there is grief. In the Hebrew scriptures ashes are very often used in times of grief, and loss, and mourning, but in my experience we don't hear much about the association of grief with Lent. But grief is part of every human life and it can become a barrier to our relationship with God and with others. Unresolved grief can make us bitter towards God and unwilling to say "thy will be done." Unresolved grief can overwhelm us with despair and prevent us from repenting and turning away from harmful thoughts and behaviors. To resolve our grief we must accept that it is real, allow ourselves to experience it, and learn how to live through it and into the new life awaiting us on the other side of it.

And we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that grief is only about the loss of a loved one – grief is a part of every loss: the loss of a job, the loss of a dream of what might have been, or the ending of a friendship. A couple of years ago I volunteered as a chaplain at the hospital in Hendersonville. One of my tasks was to lead a discussion group on grief with patients who were in the psychiatric unit. These were folks whose mental illness was so severe that they were a danger to themselves or others. I began each session by explaining that grief is about loss, not just the death of a loved one, and then asked each participant to list things that might cause grief. Every session we filled a large white board with a long list of all the losses in life that bring grief. One of the most poignant, that seemed to come up every time was this: "I grieve the loss of the person I was before I became ill."

The picture from the Hebrew scriptures is a picture of sitting with our grief, not running away from it. When the people in those stories, like Job and others, experienced profound loss they went outside somewhere, poured ashes on their head, and just sat down to grieve. The ashes are a reminder of our grief. A reminder that it is real, that it matters to God, and that we must be willing to sit with our grief in order to begin to heal.

In just a moment I will place the ashes on your forehead in the sign of the cross and say "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." Heard in a certain way these words might seem dark or even depressing. But I believe they are words of hope. They are Christ's words to us and Christ is telling us to remember his story and our place in his story. Remember that that we all sin, remember that we all grieve, remember

that we all will pass through the doorway of death. And when you remember all that, remember this too: that we are all forgiven, that we are all loved by Christ, and that on the other side of these Lenten ashes we will find the glorious light of the resurrection.

Amen.