

Ash Wednesday  
Christ and Grace  
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Isaiah 58:1-12  
February 26, 2020

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Lately I have been given many occasions to contemplate the cycle of life, the reality of ashes, and the hope of a cross traced on the forehead. From the beginning to the end of our lives we have had crosses traced with oil or with ash.

On the first Sunday of each month we offer healing prayer that ends with a blessing and anointing with oil to remind us that we belong to God no matter what we are going through in life; to remind us of the hope of God's healing power.

A few weeks ago I was with a family to anoint their loved one at the time of death, praying for her to be received into the arms of God's mercy and peace, as I traced the cross on her forehead.

Then on Sunday, four were baptized and welcomed into the household of God. There was some holy chaos in here as these four were sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. As we were drenched in the waters of baptism I was so aware of the Holy Spirit in this place, washing over all of us.

As I anointed each of them with oil, and as I saw that shimmering cross on their foreheads, I was immediately reminded of the crosses of ash that we will have on our foreheads today/tonight. Their crosses were new and shiny and joyful for all of us on Sunday. But in all that joy, did we really hear the words that were said in that service? Words that renounced Satan, the spiritual forces of wickedness, and all sinful desires that draw us from the love of God. Because there is evil in this world and none of us will avoid coming in contact with it at some time in our lives.

When we are baptized, we are buried with Christ in his death. And that is sobering. But the very next sentence in the thanksgiving over the water in the service of baptism says that we also share in Christ's resurrection by this very same baptism. And so, on this day at the start of Lent, the symbol of ashes in the shape of a cross is a powerful one. It holds together life and death, as we remember that the cross placed on our foreheads when we began our new life in Christ will be retraced over and over each time we have prayers for healing, each Ash Wednesday. It reminds us that we are mortal and imperfect, *and* that we are healed, loved, and redeemed by God.

The season of Lent is a time when we can take an honest look at our lives, to see where we find ourselves in our relationship with God and with the world. It has traditionally been a time when we engage in practices of fasting, prayer and almsgiving. Our passages from both Isaiah and Matthew talk about these practices. A good religious practice will bring you closer to God and to your neighbor.

I have been reading comments online about what people are going to give up for Lent. Some people even announce that they are giving up the Internet for Lent! To give up something, just because it's Lent, is not necessarily going to bring us closer to God and neighbor. Now if giving up the Internet gives us more time that we then spend in prayer or in doing acts of mercy for the needy, then it's a good thing to give up. For me to give up chocolate, only so that I can say I had

enough willpower to avoid the temptation of chocolate for forty days, doesn't really draw me closer to God. It only affirms my own willpower. But if I use the money I would have spent on chocolate to buy food for the hungry, then it becomes a good Lenten practice. Or if I am clear with myself that it is only by God's power and grace that I lose my desire for chocolate, then it becomes a spiritual practice that destroys my unhealthy attachment to chocolate.

In Matthew, Jesus says, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; give your alms in secret; don't let others know you are fasting." It was not piety that Jesus warned against, but practicing piety for the wrong reasons.

Whatever you decide to do for Lent, I encourage you to think it through. Ask yourself if it leads to destruction of an evil or brings you closer to God, and if so, then it's a good Lenten practice. And we can always run our ideas by the prophet Isaiah. Is it loosening the bonds of injustice, undoing yokes, freeing the oppressed, or caring for the hungry and homeless in some way? Is it a fast that God would choose for us? We might also consider taking on something for Lent instead – a Lenten study, a commitment to weekly worship, or a daily time of prayer and silence to intentionally be with God. A bit of honest self-examination of our own behaviors may reveal what God would choose for us.

We leave church with ashes on our foreheads, not to proclaim our holiness or piety or superiority, but to acknowledge that we sin and are in need of repentance and renewal. We leave here with more than ashes on our foreheads. We leave here with the hope of the cross traced on our entire lives, reminding us that we have the promise of a life that is larger than this life, the promise of eternal healing and wholeness, and the promise that we have been created from dust to do amazing things in this world. What will help you draw near to God this Lent? What will we do as repairers of the breach and restorers of our streets to reveal God's healing light? What we do matters, and why we do it matters even more, because we have been marked as Christ's own forever. Amen.

Blessing the Dust  
A Blessing for Ash Wednesday

All those days  
you felt like dust,  
like dirt,

as if all you had to do  
was turn your face  
toward the wind  
and be scattered  
to the four corners

or swept away  
by the smallest breath  
as insubstantial—

Did you not know  
what the Holy One  
can do with dust?

This is the day  
we freely say  
we are scorched.

This is the hour  
we are marked  
by what has made it  
through the burning.

This is the moment  
we ask for the blessing  
that lives within  
the ancient ashes,  
that makes its home  
inside the soil of  
this sacred earth.

So let us be marked  
not for sorrow.  
And let us be marked  
not for shame.  
Let us be marked  
not for false humility  
or for thinking  
we are less  
than we are

but for claiming  
what God can do  
within the dust,  
within the dirt,  
within the stuff

of which the world  
is made,  
and the stars that blaze  
in our bones,  
and the galaxies that spiral  
inside the smudge  
we bear.

—Jan Richardson