

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 14, 2018
Ash Wednesday
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Psalm 103:8-13
2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10
Matthew 6:1-21

On this night when we gather to begin our journey through Lent, we do so with the awareness that many Christians do not understand Ash Wednesday, and some even believe that it is unbiblical to commemorate it. I want to speak to this tonight as directly as possible by examining two things: 1) The biblical meaning of the ashes, and 2) Looking at our Scripture lessons for this day.

First, we must ask: *What did ashes mean to people in the first century as Jesus was preaching and teaching among them?*

The answer to that question is that the ashes, like all of Christian faith, is rooted in Jewish thought and practice. Let's examine a few Old Testament passages to see how this is true.

In Genesis 3:19, God speaks to Adam about the consequences of his sin, and in part God says to him: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; *you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*"

In this instance, ashes clearly point to the reality of our *mortality*. Each one of you here tonight must understand without equivocation that your life will not go on forever. You are mortal. You will return to the dust from which you came.

In another Old Testament passage from Job, Job is found saying: “I despise myself, and I repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6). In the context of this passage, ashes symbolize not just mortality, but also *repentance from sin*.

In yet another passage from the book of Daniel, we find Daniel saying: “I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and supplications with fasting and sackcloth and ashes” (Daniel 9:3). In this context, Daniel is actually penitent and prayerful on behalf of *all the people*. In times of national mourning or prayer, people would often cover themselves with sackcloth and ashes.

And in another Old Testament passage from the book of Esther, which tells the story of how the children of Israel were almost exterminated *en masse* by a pagan king, we read this about Esther, the queen:

Esther, seized with deathly anxiety, fled to the Lord. She took off her splendid apparel and put on the garments of distress and mourning, and instead of costly perfumes she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she utterly humbled her body, and...prayed to the Lord her God (Esther 14:1-3).

In this case, as with Daniel, Esther covers herself with ashes and prays to God on behalf of *all her people* who were under threat of extinction.

From this brief sampling of passages from the Old Testament, we get a good idea of what a first century Jew was doing and thinking when ashes were put on

one's head. And what we see in this practice are three things. Ashes on the forehead symbolized *recognition of one's mortality* (like Adam); it symbolized *repentance* (like Job); and it embodied *interceding for others* (as in the case of Daniel and Esther).

Some might respond to this and say: Well, that was the Old Testament. What about Jesus and the New Testament?

Come with me to Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus upbraids the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida for not responding to his preaching and teaching in their midst. He says to them: *Woe to you, Chorazin and Bethsaida, for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes* (Mt. 11:21).

So, the biblical roots for what we are doing here tonight are very strong, and there is clear evidence from the Gospels that Jesus recognizes the practice.

Let's look now at the specific lessons assigned to us for Ash Wednesday in our lectionary. Let's start with the Old Testament lesson from Joel. This reading is so important that I want to quote a portion of it again:

Even now, says 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, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the elders, gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep and say, "Spare thy people, O LORD, and

make not thy heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" Then the LORD became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people. (Joel 2:12-18)

What makes this text significant is that Joel is describing an *official, public day of fasting and prayer*. All of the people are called together to engage in a *corporate act of repentance*, so that God might have mercy on a sinful *people*.

One of the reasons for this was so that people who had wandered might come back to God. And so through the centuries during Lent the Church has always said: "Come back to me. Rend your hearts. Repent and return to Christ and the Church."

There is precedent for calling for this day of public fasting and prayer earlier in the Old Testament. It happened once a year on perhaps the most important day of the year. The day was *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. You can read about it in Leviticus 16. On this day, every Jew was called upon to pray, and to fast, and to abstain from pretty much everything.

There is a very real sense, then, in which Ash Wednesday becomes the Church's version of *Yom Kippur*. And the reading from Joel serves to reinforce the *public nature* of Ash Wednesday. *Lent begins with a public, corporate call to prayer, fasting, and repentance.*

But although Lent begins in this public way, it would be impossible to journey the entire 40 days in a public fashion. The prayer, fasting, and repentance

that we are summoned to are to trickle down into our personal, private journeys.

This is the purpose of our Gospel lesson for Ash Wednesday.

In our Gospel lesson from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs his disciples not to “practice their piety” before others. He cites three specific examples of this, which have great significance for us later. They are: *giving alms, prayer, and fasting.*

Regarding giving alms, Jesus says:

When you give alms, sound no trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Mt. 6:2-4)

And regarding prayer, Jesus says: *When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men...When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Mt. 6:5-6)*

And then regarding fasting, Jesus says: *When you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites; for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men...But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who sees in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Mt. 6:16-18)*

So, if we have ever wondered why this Gospel text is read on Ash Wednesday, it is to *show us and remind us of the private acts of spiritual discipline* that characterize the remainder of our Lenten journey after Ash Wednesday. And

it seems obvious that one of the things Jesus is doing here is trying to cut off spiritual pride at the knees.

It is also worth noting here that Jesus doesn't tell us *not to do these disciplines*. He simply tells us *how* we are to practice them. It is clear that Jesus expects his disciples to be people who *give to the poor* regularly – but discreetly.

It is clear that Jesus expects his disciples to be people who *pray* regularly, not just at public worship, but *personally and privately*.

And it is clear that Jesus expects his disciples to be people who *fast* regularly. Now I confess here that I've always struggled with fasting. I find it hard and difficult. And with good reason. Just try going without food for a brief time, and your body will quickly and loudly start to get your attention.

Fasting helps turn our attention from our body and its needs to repentance and to returning to God. Fasting puts you into a heightened state of awareness. It promotes focus. It engenders spiritual alertness. It unites soul and body.

So, why is this Gospel lesson from Matthew important, and why is it read every Ash Wednesday? It is important because it reminds us that Lent cannot be reduced to just *abstinence*. Lent cannot be about just fasting, or the “giving up” of something. It is also about the “taking on” of something, especially the disciplines of giving alms and prayer.

Now I can imagine that even after all I've said tonight, there still might be some who bristle at the notion of Lent, and especially a focus on these three important practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. They might still ask: Why do we do *these* things during Lent?

The short answer to that question is because Jesus did it. In Matthew 4 we are told that Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, praying and fasting before he did battle with Satan.

Time does not permit me to go into detail, but scholars have noted that when Satan comes to tempt Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, the three temptations are correlated to the temptations that confronted Adam in Genesis 3. Those temptations, in shorthand form, were temptations to *pleasure, possessions, and pride*.

In Matthew's telling of the story, Jesus does battle in the desert with these three "core" temptations, which are at the root of all sin. But unlike Adam, who yielded to the temptations, *Jesus as the NEW ADAM overcomes and gains victory over them!*

And with each new Lenten season, Jesus calls on us to renew our battle with these three "core" temptations in life:

He calls us to fast in order to overcome our disordered attachment to physical pleasure and gratification.

He calls us to give alms to overcome our attachment to money and material things.

And he calls us to pray in order to overcome our vanity, pride, and self-love, and to develop humility.

These disciplines are at the “core” of what it means to be disciples of Jesus, because they address the core temptations that are the root of all human sinfulness. And with each new Lenten journey, Jesus calls on us to renew our struggle against the Evil One who seeks to destroy us and keep us away from God’s purposes for us.

So the Lenten journey is not a duty. It is not an obligation. It is not legalism. It is not works righteousness. It is a grace-filled journey of acknowledging *who we are, and Whose we are.*

And it begins *publicly*. We call all of the people together for a solemn assembly. We smear ashes on our foreheads. We confess with the words of the hymn that says: *Your love, O Lord, our sinful race has not returned, but falsified.* And we continue by saying: *Author of mercy, turn your face, and grant repentance for our pride.*

I am grateful to God for the opportunity that our Lenten journey affords us, and I’m grateful that I get to take that journey with all of you.

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