

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 6, 2019
Ash Wednesday
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Psalm 103:8-13
2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

On this night when we gather to begin our journey through Lent, I want to speak briefly about the biblical meaning of the ashes, and then look at our Old Testament lesson from Joel. Hopefully, this will give us all a refresher course as to the significance of this service.

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 first century Jewish people were doing and thinking when ashes were put on their heads.

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 our Old Testament lesson for tonight. 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. We will discuss this aspect to our Lenten journey on Sunday.

For now, it is sufficient to realize that our 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.