

February 18, 2015

Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58:1-12

- 1** Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.
- 2** Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.
- 3** "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.
- 4** Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.
- 5** Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?
- 6** Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?
- 7** Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
- 9** Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
- 10** if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.
- 11** The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.
- 12** Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the city streets.

Psalms 51

- 1** Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.
2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.
- 3** For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.
- 4** Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.
5 Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
- 6** Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place.
7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
- 8** Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
9 Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.
- 10** Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
- 11** Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.
- 12** Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
- 13** Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.
- 14** Deliver me from bloodguilt, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

15 Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise.

16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

17 My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

18 May it please you to prosper Zion, to build up the walls of Jerusalem.

19 Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous, in burnt offerings offered whole; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Ash Wednesday rolls around every year, arising annually as a reminder of our humanity, of our need, of our sin. The ashes that mark our heads draw upon the biblical tradition of donning sackcloth and ashes for times of repentance, as a sign of our need for forgiveness, our need for deliverance, of our need of God. Perhaps that's one reason why our culture continues to marginalize religion, and especially Christianity. Christian faith, especially during Lent, reminds us of our imperfections. Reminds us of our needs. But unlike consumer capitalism, there's no quick fix that we can purchase at WalMart, no miracle crèmes or tonic elixirs to cure our chronic

ills. We can't buy our way to betterment. Ashes arise as the only cure for our ailments.

Some struggle with the practice of imposing ashes as a sign of penitence. They point to Jesus' advice on prayer and fasting, to pray in private and to not haughtily display our piety. In his words, not to "disfigure our faces." Isn't that just what ashes do? What's the point of this practice?

In Jesus' Jerusalem, the religious hierarchy expected a certain amount of pious theatre. Religious authorities judged faithfulness not on contrition or authentic repentance, but on the displays put forth as outward signs of the inner transformation. In this context, the point of ashes – to humble us in sight of our humanity – became obscured by the attempt to appear more religious than your neighbor, more faithful than

your friends. Rather than a sign of dust, ashes became a point of pride.

With this in mind, questions about the propriety of ashes make sense. Are we just bragging about our religiosity here? Are we just showing off our faithfulness?

We must remember contextual piece about ashes in Jesus' time. Application of ashes didn't happen once a year at a synagogue service. Instead, this was a very public act of applying dirt and soot to your body, and something that a person would often do frequently. This wasn't a small cross at the center of your forehead, but a bodily smattering. And if this is what you're doing – if you're swimming in the dust in order to get people's attention, to make yourself appear as more holy or a better Christian – then it's probably better not to receive ashes.

For us here, though, we're not sloshing dirt on our face in the town square. We're not broadcasting our piety. Instead, we've gathered here as a community to admit something to ourselves: we are dust. We are dust. As we enter Lent, as we walk these forty days through toward the cross, as we see the movement of our Lord to take the effects of our sin upon himself, we finally come face to face with our inability to save ourselves. We are powerless to accomplish our own salvation. Like dust, we're tossed about by the wind, unable to control our own destiny. We must finally admit that the concept of a self-made woman and self-made man are myths, for all that we make ends up as dust in our hands, themselves made of dust.

The ashes we put on ourselves tonight remind us of this, that without Christ, we are dust and will return to dust. Yet, tonight's scriptures also remind us of something else, namely

that God breathes life into the dust. In Isaiah's words, "The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail." In great mercy, God breathes life into our dusty forms. God waters the deserts of our lives with forgiveness and grace.

We put the ashes on our faces, then, to admit to ourselves of our need of God. Rather than a show of pride to the world, we instead admit our need to ourselves. We admit we need God. We admit we need change. We admit we need to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of unjust yokes, to let the oppressed go free. We admit we need to share our bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into our homes. We admit we need to clothe the naked and not to hide yourself from your own kin. In our ashes, we admit we need to

offer food to the hungry and justice to the afflicted. Rather than pride, ashes communicate our conviction that we have to reason to be prideful.

An ashen cross, then, says that the only way this change comes, that the only way we might find life in the dust of our lives, is through the cross of Jesus Christ. Ashes are not a point of pride, but our place of need. Ashes arise as the only cure for our ailments because the only medicine for our pain is found in the place where God took that pain, the cross of Jesus Christ. Ashes on our foreheads are tactile reminders that we are dust, and without Christ, our return to the dust would be final.

And ashes also remind us that, when God formed humanity out of the dust, God also breathed the Holy Spirit, the very breathe of God, into our dusty souls, that we might become the image and likeness of God. We are dust, the sort of

dust God chooses to bless through the work of the cross. That's
the kind of healing we need, the kind of healing we find in Lent.

Thanks be to God. Amen.