

Sermon for Ash Wednesday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

So begins the season of Lent. With a party and a feast, friends gathering to gorge ourselves on yummy junk, the “fat” in Fat Tuesday rightly earned. And with a regular day, the middle of the week, interrupting work or school or regular routines with an odd moment stolen away. For a time, all Wednesdays were set aside for fasting. Come Holy Week, Wednesday’s the day Judas snuck off to make his deal and catch his pouch of silver. All Wednesdays from then on held a special meaning for us. You see, it’s rarely the great celebrations that bring us great temptation. No, it’s on the most mundane day of the week, that the greatest evil came. And while we’ve lost sight of that evil hiding in the mundane, we still gather today, breaking away from normalcy to mark the beginning of our preparations. In between breakfast and the commute, or in place of lunch, or somehow tucked between a rushed dinner and bedtime routines, we pause. Usually when we pause to mark a special day, it’s for a celebration. An anniversary of some kind, a birthday, even a visit from a friend that’s fallen out of touch. But today we pause, not for a celebration. Today we pause, bearing the ashes of our celebration.

The marks we’ll soon bear, they come from a memory of what was. The last time we went through this cycle, we welcomed the triumphant and ill-fated Jesus into Jerusalem with palms waving and songs lifted heavenward. “Hosanna!” we called, and the palm fronds lifted our eyes and our hearts to God. But today, we’ll wear what remains, our memory of what has happened and what’s to come on our hearts, and the ashes of those palms -- defeated, burned, and ground to dust -- on our heads. Bearing the ashes of our celebration.

I’m always amazed that we do this, smearing ashes, of all things, onto the one part of our bodies that leads us into the world. We don’t roll up our sleeves and hide a thumbprint of soot where the world can’t see. There, just above the windows to the soul, where coworkers and loved ones and enemies alike can’t help but see, there we mark ourselves with the grim statement of our purpose today, the mundane reality that haunts us all. Our purpose today is a dismal one. Today we face our failing, our reality, our mortality. Today we name that constant and today we wear that certainty. Today we bear it. That we are dust, and to dust we shall return. All those things we cherish will come to an end. All those places we care for will change. And all those people we love, all of them, too, will return to dust. Our land-warming parties, our family heirlooms, our families and friends and pleasant acquaintances passed on the sidewalk, all of them, are but dust. All celebrations borne this day in ash.

When I’ve worn these ashes before, the pressure of the priest’s thumb above my eyes seems to stay there longer than it should, my skin aware of some pressure, maybe some forgotten reality finally faced. Though my eyes can’t see the dark smudge I bear, my skin knows it’s there. Until it doesn’t. The pressure fades, and soon, I’ll forget. I’ll lead myself into the world with that mark -- admitting that I don’t have it all together to anyone with eyes to see -- I’ll lead myself into the world heavy, but soon the mundane day catches up to my self-reflection, and before I realize it, I’ve forgotten that I bear this reminder. Until I don’t. I’ll catch a glimpse in the mirror and debate washing it off so I won’t be embarrassed by, I don’t what, admitting to the thing all people share? Or someone will ask me what I’ve gotten into that would leave my white-collar face so dirty. Ashes, I’ll probably say, as though that should mean anything to non-church-going types. But I think it does. Even though they may not know exactly what we’re about today, they know what ashes are. Living things don’t parade in ashes. Ashes mean that something that was there before isn’t anymore. You know, ashes are the result, not just of combustion, but of imperfect combustion. They’re the byproduct. We recognize our own imperfection and our own end with the imperfect end of something else. Last year’s celebration revisited in this year’s contrition.

When we wear these ashes, we carry with us all the meaning that ashes carry. The history. Last year's carried palms lifted high, sure, but ash has been more. Wildfires raging stronger than the will to fight them. But they're older, still. Ancient cities smothered and bodies molded into bittersweet scenes in the powder. And they're now, too. A home razed. A loved one too recently gone. A promise that mundane reality is harder than most of us admit. But that's us. We bear reality this day in ash. But ash carries more meaning, still, and when we smear that dismal byproduct on our heads, we bear this meaning along with all that heartbreak and sting. Ash stimulates growth, fertilizes dying soil, gives new life where life was failing before. We're marked with that, too.

Today we pause in an extraordinary way to mark an otherwise ordinary day. We enter Lent looking for those parts of us that need to be turned to ash. And while we work through our fallibility and our imperfections, we know that on the other side of this journey, a procession with palms and "hosannas!" and salvation is coming. And with it, the unavoidable reality of sin and temptation, of promise and tenderness, of death and of life.