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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Ash Wednesday
February 17, 2021

Lectionary Year B: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

There was a time when using ashes on Ash Wednesday was unheard of in most corners of the Episcopal Church. But even as ashes have become a regular part of our Lenten observance, it is important to remember that they predate Christianity by many centuries. A common Old Testament discipline was to "put on sackcloth and ashes" in acts of, for example, mourning and penitence. Sackcloth was a material derived from woven goat's hair, which, for the wearer, was very uncomfortable; it was used on occasions such as a person's death. Ashes, in a similar manner, were applied to the crown of one's head, and were used on occasions of repentance. Fittingly, ashes are the remains of something that has been burned, usually after its useful life has ended. The mortality-related symbolism of ashes is, therefore, obvious.

In my lifetime, I can recall Ash Wednesday services with no ashes whatsoever, followed by their re-introduction after liturgical reforms dating to the Sixties and Seventies. When I was in seminary, I remember that the Imposition of Ashes, set in juxtaposition with Jesus' advice in Matthew, chapter 6, made for a rather jarring experience of Ash Wednesday. When we're not supposed to make a big show out of our piety, how is it okay for us to walk around with big black crosses on our foreheads? There were even a few at seminary who would attend Ash Wednesday services at the local Roman Catholic parish, where the earliest Mass was at seven o'clock in

the morning; this would ensure, then, that they had their ashes on all day for everyone to see. Not really in keeping with the spirit of Jesus' warning, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them..." (6:1a).

Here at St. Anne's we have received some guidance from the Diocese as to how to "do" Ash Wednesday during the pandemic. There has been some concern about transmitting Covid-19 through touch, so that would, presumably, preclude the imposition of ashes from the celebrant's fingers onto the foreheads of the recipients. So, the diocesan directive advises us to follow the more ancient pattern of sprinkling the ashes on the crowns of your heads (as would've been the practice in Old Testament times). When you come forward tonight, please know that you have the option of receiving ashes in the usual manner on your forehead, or via sprinkling on the crown of your head. If you wish to receive via the indirect, sprinkling method, please indicate that by crossing your arms across your chest; otherwise, come forward as you normally would.

Another historical consideration I would draw to your attention is that ashes on Ash Wednesday is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Episcopal Church, and that no one should feel obligated to receive them. This is not a Sacrament or a means of grace, so your salvation is not at stake here. Instead, we look at ashes as an aid to our Lenten discipline -- as a remembrance that we are mortal and, hence, utterly dependent on the mercy of God right up to the end of our earthly lives and beyond.

Our Gospel text, at the very end, gets to some Ash Wednesday-

related ideas of things rusting away; this isn't too far removed from the image of our bodies disintegrating in the ground once we're dead. The thing to remember tonight about ourselves and about our worldly wares is that they're finite. They won't last forever and the amount of good we'll get out of them is limited, so it is advisable for us to grab a hold of something permanent -- namely God and his infinite grace and mercy. Jesus tells us, "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal" (6:20). And, if you'd like to store up for yourself treasures in heaven, place your trust in God instead of occupying yourself with greedy pursuits.

But it takes a certain amount of humility to do this. When we apply ashes and say, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return," we admit that we are mortal in a world that arrogantly attempts to stave off death and vainly continues its search for the fountain of youth. This is our opportunity to do the opposite; we humbly embrace our mortality and place ourselves in our Lord's hands. In the end, God is our sole protection as we depart this life through the grave and gate of death, to then find our souls received into the arms of our Creator. Remember the words attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi: "It is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

Again, it takes humility to get to this point, and humility doesn't necessarily deem accomplishments and works as important. In tonight's Gospel, Jesus offers some rather pithy critiques of people

who do things to get noticed. Why? Because they're doing them out of a sense of arrogance and superiority instead of humility. Humility demands that everything we do is done for its inherent goodness rather than for recognition. Moreover, Jesus would remind us that trophies will tarnish and awards will yellow and fade. But we don't live for those things; rather, we live for the Lord. Our accomplishments and works are not our treasure; Jesus says, to the contrary, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (6:21). Our treasure is in God, who is the Eternal One, who will outlast all our worldly wares and our legacies themselves.

This past year has been sufficiently humbling, I might add, and if you haven't experienced it as such, I don't know where you've been or what you've been doing. If you simply look around, you'll see plenty of reminders of mortality and frailty; and, perhaps, some of those reminders affected you directly. But, when times are tough, aren't we reminded all the more profoundly of our dependence on God? Now, we're maybe a bit more aware of the impermanence and unreliability of those things that can be consumed by moth and rust, and we can turn to God in humility and trust knowing that he is the only One who has accompanied and will continue to accompany us through our darkest hours.

As today is the first day of Lent, we may be thinking of Lenten disciplines, too; the concept of "giving up something for Lent" has become engrained in our culture much like Christmas is celebrated by Christians and non-Christians alike. Seeing that, as a church, we've "given up" so many things already, and that we've been in a

long-term Lent since March of 2020, it would be absurd to demand further sacrifices from the faithful. This year, it may be more helpful to reflect spiritually on the sacrifices you all have made, and, perhaps, give up some of your less-desirable impulses, should you be so inclined.

While the phrase "Lenten journey" is, in my opinion, way overused, we nonetheless prepare ourselves this evening for a walk through the wildernesses and desolate valleys of our spiritual landscapes, which then leads us to the Cross and Resurrection. Were it possible for us to experience joy apart from the knowledge of suffering and pain, our liturgical year might look a bit different...but, as it stands, there is no glory without the cross and no eternal life without death. So we receive that which we will one day become -- ashes, dust, death -- knowing that this is the gate we pass through to share in the victory of the Resurrection.

Amen.