

“Ashes to Ashes”

Sermon by Beth Hart-Andersen

Ash Wednesday 03/09/2011

Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

As a small child, along with my siblings and other neighborhood children, I remember burying any number of mice, hamsters, goldfish, even starlings, robins, and other wild birds. We would dig a small hole in the ground and gently place the creature, wrapped in a handkerchief, in the earth. Then with all the solemnity we could muster we would cover the creature with dirt and sing the saddest songs we could think of.

Ashes to ashes...

Some thirty years later, I remember watching my own children and their church-school friends make the outline of a coffin from building blocks on the church-school floor. The children would then take turns lying, very still, in the coffin shape while the others processed around it singing a tragic little made-up song. Week after week, they took turns, never seeming to tire of this little rehearsal.

Ashes to ashes...

I remember, as well, a park in San Francisco that also was home to a pre-school. Each time I took our children to play there we had to check out the row of small hodge-podge grave markers, all along the park's back chain-linked fence. The plots were indicated by painted rocks and cardboard; pieces of wood and other embellishments all fashioned by small hands; on them were inscribed things like 'Sparkle the mouse' or 'brown bird' and even 'three flies'.

Ashes to ashes...

From very early on we try to figure out both death and life.

Tonight, with a bit of ash and the words: "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." we will have our foreheads marked; a simple reminder of our mortality.

You are of this earth and to this earth you shall return.

Still, to be reminded makes us uncomfortable.

Presbyterians have not always observed Ash Wednesday. It was not much observed in my childhood church. I was about 8 when I first recall my friend Katie coming home from her parochial school with a dark smudge on her forehead. I was curious that first time about this thing she called "Ash Wednesday" and in subsequent years grew envious. I felt a

similar pang about the bunch of palms I collected from the pews after our Palm Sunday services. Big and lush and green; they waved about so nicely... as I showed them to my Catholic playmate I felt proud and greedy about them... and then a little ashamed; especially when I saw the single frond that she brought home from her church and another carefully folded into a cross. Somehow there was more to this season of Lent.

Ashes to ashes...

How many of us would willingly let others know our weakness or our vulnerability? Yet, on this day, we do just that; we admit by the ashes on our forehead that we are broken, sinful, mortal... indeed dying.

From the moment of our birth we are moving toward our death. Instead of denial, in this season called lent, we take time to contemplate our mortality.

Ashes to ashes... frankly, it is a bit of a relief.

Lent is the season of forty days from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday, not including Sundays.

It is: a reminder of Jesus' time of trial

It is: a time of reflection,

of prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

It is: the intentional grounding of our-selves in our humanness

our brokenness;

our shattered world.

It is: grief - the rending of clothes and the rending of lives;

Sack-cloth and ashes.

It is: wilderness wandering...

Lent is an invitation to honesty;

remembering that we are marked; imprinted as Christ's forever.

Lent is an invitation to life; not life as we would like it to be, but as it is:

messy, broken, hurting;

filled with heart wrenching tragedy and heart breaking beauty.

This evening we will come forward to be marked; a cross imprinted with ashes on our forehead.

A few Sundays ago I was at Westminster for the annual meeting. (I know, two such meetings in 8 days, maybe I was starting my penance early...) We were singing a hymn at the close of the meeting and I noticed a not quite three year old girl in the pew in front of me. She carefully studied those singing around her and then looked to find the book we were all holding. She lifted the heavy hymnal, placed it on the pew, and thumbed through the pages until she found one that suited her. Then she stood, hymnal in both hands and joined in the singing.

Imprinting starts early.

We are first marked by water and word. A cross of wet imprinted on our forehead. "You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever."

Tonight, the words will be different; "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." marked by another cross, imprinted with ash as Christ's own.

Ashes to ashes...

Lent is an invitation to turn down the volume of the noise in our lives... as lively or positive as that noise might seem... to dial back the distractions that keep us from facing our doubts and anger, from approaching the abyss of grief or incessant regret. By the ashes of lent we are invited to enter our own wilderness, as fearful as that sounds, and sit with our self and expect that God will meet us there.

Ashes to ashes...

"Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return."

With these words we will be marked.

"Take, eat, this is my body..." with these words we will be fed.

"...drink you all, of it..." with these words our thirsting will be quenched.

With crosses of ashes we gather at Christ's table... marked by our brokenness and wilderness wandering... bearing the imprint of Christ.

With a smudge of dark and grit on our forehead we proclaim our longing to be fully met by God.

By way of the cross, we come to the table; broken imperfect... more of the earth and dust than of water and word...

But still we come...

It is a welcome table; a table where we are fed.

There we find a welcome, not because we are good... but because we are hungry.

This evening we gather for the imposition of ashes; and, to take and eat; because God is good.

Let us come with all our longing, without fear, and enter the wilderness of lent. With parched souls and hungry hearts; let us be imprinted by Christ for in him we are met and we are fed.

Amen.