

Now What?

A Sermon Preached by the
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Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2009
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bloomington, Minnesota

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Here we are again, Ash Wednesday, seems like only yesterday that we were putting up the Christmas tree! But here we are again, about to stumble into Lent, about to wander into the wilderness of the forty days of Lent, forty days between now and Easter. Once again, we read the familiar Ash Wednesday scriptures, Psalm 51, “Create in me a clean heart, O God. . .” the Old Testament lesson from the prophet Joel, “. . . return to me with all your heart, says the Lord. . . rend your hearts and not your clothing,” and from Matthew, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.”

And once again, we go out into the dark with ashes smudged on our foreheads, a most visible reminder that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Now what? What do we do with those holy words, what do we do with the reminder of our own death, what do we do with the remembrance of ashes once we leave here?

Later in the service, we will read from the Ash Wednesday liturgy in our *Book of Common Worship*, which invites us to observe a holy Lent, and reminds us that, “We begin our journey to Easter with the sign of ashes. This ancient sign speaks of the frailty and uncertainty of human life, and marks the penitence of this community.”

We are about as comfortable with the idea of communal “penitence” as we are with the idea of individual “iniquities” or “piety,” as we are with a cross of ashes on our foreheads, which somehow seems to contradict the admonishment from Matthew to beware of practicing our piety in public places. They are words or ritual that seem to come from another life, from a time too long ago for us to pay too much attention to. They don’t seem to fit. As I was starting to write this sermon on Monday night, the phone rang and someone asked to speak to “Gale Wilson.” For a minute, I was speechless, because being called by my maiden name seemed to come from another life.

I finally recovered enough to learn that it was someone from the alumni council of the university I attended. Clearly, I haven't kept in touch!

But back to penitence and piety and ashes, those things that show up again and again in the scripture and liturgy for Ash Wednesday.

The passage from Joel is the reading for most churches on Ash Wednesday, so its call at the beginning of every Lenten season is for the rending of our hearts, for repentance, that deliberate act of will that turns us around, that turns us back to God.

You will remember that for ancient people the heart symbolized what the brain symbolizes for us today. The heart was understood to be the place where will and intellect were centered, and so rending one's heart was an act of conscientious repentance. To repent, to turn to God, implies that, from that point on, a person will lead a life different from the one lived before. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."

In the ancient world, ashes were used as a purification offering, as a cleansing agent. In the book of Numbers, for example, there is the account of the sacrifice of the red heifer. The ashes from the sacrifice were to be kept outside the camp, in a clean place, to remind the people that, "they shall be kept for the congregation of the Israelites for the water for cleansing." And Job, you may remember, used ashes to cleanse himself after the Lord rebuked him. "Create in me a clean heart, O God."

Ashes were also used to express mourning and sorrow. Not long ago, our lectionary reading for Sunday was from the book of Jonah, the account of the city of Ninevah being confronted with their sin and how the King and every living creature covered themselves with sackcloth and ashes, lamenting in an act communal penitence.

Finally, on Ash Wednesday, the symbol of ashes becomes a metaphor for our insignificance. "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." The second Creation story in Genesis has God creating human beings from dust. It humbles us to realize that in the face of the enormity of the universe, human beings are but a speck of dust. The somber refrain that we use in committal services, "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," reminds us of our finitude, our imperfection and our morality.

But the imposition of ashes, the sign of the cross on our foreheads, is not just to remind us that we're going to die. It also calls for a "sober examination of our lives, so that we might live more fully in the abundant life of Christ." Repentance, turning around, turning back to God, tearing our hearts, as individuals, as a community and beyond, is both powerful and empowering. Sadly, for most of us, once we leave the sanctuary, once we've

washed the ashes off our foreheads, our intention to repent, to turn back to God, gets lost somewhere along the road on this Lenten journey. Few of us will have the will or the determination or the desire to truly repent and live a life different from the one we've been living. Before you know it, it's Easter and we're practicing resurrection.

In some Christian traditions, those on the Lenten journey give up something, or more recently, take on a Lenten discipline meant to remind them of their intention to repent. How many of us have friends who give up chocolate or alcohol for Lent, or who decide to make Lent the time to start a new diet or a new exercise program. How many of us have done that? Instead of being a reminder of penitence, it's almost like making a New Year's resolution – and we all know how long those usually last.

No, giving up chocolate or getting on the treadmill doesn't turn you back to God. It may make you feel more virtuous, but it's a poor substitute for the sober examination of your life and your relationship with God.

Jan Richardson is an artist and writer who has a website called *The Painted Prayerbook*, in which she reflects on scripture through her artwork. This year, as she approached Lent, she began working with charcoal, a completely different medium than she was used to using. I was especially taken with her thoughts about taking on a different discipline. She writes, "Taking up a new medium, entering a different way of working, diving or tiptoeing into a new approach: all this can be complex, unsettling, disorienting, discombobulating. . . (but) allowing ourselves to be present to the messiness provides an amazing way to sort through what is essential and to clear a path through the chaos. To borrow the words of the writer of Psalm 51 . . . it creates a clean heart within us."

Thinking about how we move toward repentance, Richardson reminds us that, "Ash Wednesday beckons us to cross over the threshold into a season that's all about working through the chaos to discover what is essential. The ashes that lead us into this season remind us where we have come from. They beckon us to consider what is most basic to us, what is elemental, what survives after all that is extraneous is burned away. With its images of ashes and wilderness, Lent challenges us to reflect on what we have filled our lives with, and to see if there are habits, practices, possessions, and ways of being that have accumulated, encroached, invaded, accreted, layer upon layer, becoming a pattern of chaos that threatens to insulate us and dull us to the presence of God."

Before we wash the ashes off our foreheads tonight, before we just accidentally stumble into Lent once again, Richardson would invite us to ask ourselves these questions: "What is the state of your heart? What has taken

up residence there over the past weeks, months, years? Are there habits and ways of being that you are so invested in, so attached to, that it has become difficult to discern new directions in which God might be inviting you to move? Who can help you ponder the present patterns in your life – the good, the bad, and the ugly – and help you see where new life is stirring, and where a new path might be opening? What are the most basic, elemental, crucial things in your life, and how might God be challenging you to give your attention to them in this season?”¹

This is the time to get to know God a little better, so turn around, allow God to create a clean heart in you, to put a new and right spirit within you. You are dust, and to dust you shall return. You are a beloved child of God. Amen.

¹ Jan Richardson, *The Painted Prayerbook*, Ash Wednesday reflections 2009.