

Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:1-2, Psalm 103:8-14, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
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It was unfortunate that we had to call off the pancake supper last night due to the cold and snow. But I would rather have missed that than today's Ash Wednesday services. Many Christians from other traditions don't know about Ash Wednesday and have never tried to observe a holy Lent by beginning here with the ashes of repentance. Whether you are here for the first time or the 50th time, it is good that you are here.

By now we are familiar with the prophet Joel and his blast of the trumpet calling God's people to a solemn assembly. Danger looms from a foreign source because the people have been lax in their observance of God's laws to live with love and justice.

We can't believe it. How foreign it seems to us to hear daily of the uncivilized behavior in countries like Egypt, Syria, Sudan, Congo, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Venezuela, and now Ukraine – people and leaders acting with such hatefulness and cruelty. It has to break God's heart especially when some of it is done in the name of religion. While we are not directly responsible, these are human beings like us. We have been cruel at times if only with our thoughts or words. Let's hope and pray we in this country won't let our thoughts and words escalate to destructive actions because we don't like a particular president or public policy.

"Return to me with all your heart," the Lord pleads through the prophet. Ash Wednesday is about coming home and once again putting our trust and hope in God's future. We can leave the past behind and begin anew. God won't remember or hold the past against us. "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us," the Psalmist reminds us.

In this unique worship service, we will shortly confess a multitude of sins. Some we can assent to easily and some we may think have nothing to do with us. As part of the human race, with proper humility, we can own them all on behalf of

ourselves and others. We can be today one of many small faithful congregations repenting for the sins of the larger world in hopes that God will turn and relent and leave a blessing all around the globe and most especially in the previously mentioned countries.

The ashes we will bear, the dirty smudge, represents on the one hand our complicity with wrong thoughts, words and deeds and our intention to do better with God' help – better in prayer, better in charitable giving and better in fasting or curtailing our pleasures. The black cross on our foreheads signifies that we are guilty, and we are trying to own up to our faults and paradoxically come clean.

The ashes also remind us that we are mortal. We won't live forever. We all must die. We face our limitations today. Most male initiation rites included a stark reminder to the boy that death was very much a part of life. In some cases, the boy would have to dig his own grave and sleep in it overnight to get the message: You are not immortal and life is fragile. Ash Wednesday is a yearly initiation rite in this regard. We came from dust, and we will return to dust. Once again, we have our yearly sacramental brush with death to sober us, humble us and help us appreciate every day of life God has given us.

Finally, a certain Rabbi used to carry two pieces of paper in his wallet. One read, "I am a speck of dust." The other had written on it, "The world was created for me." They couldn't be more different, but they are equally true.

Ash Wednesday is that most peculiar of days when we try to comprehend and hold together these two propositions: in the first place, how insignificant we are in the light of the span of history, the expanse of the universe, our own failings and God's holiness and magnificence; and, secondly, the outrageous belief that while we are just specks of dust, we are also the apple of God's eye.

In this service, we are marked with the curse of Adam, the black mark, AND we are fed with the God's beloved son in the hope and expectation that we will rise from the ashes and become like him. AMEN.

