

Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:1-2, 12- 17, Psalm 103, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
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“Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill.” The word translated here as “trumpet” refers to the Jewish shofar or ram’s horn. Mark Ende demonstrated the shofar far better than I last Sunday during our Adult Education class. He told us about all the Jewish holy days. He said on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, the shofar is blown 100 times during the service to “awaken the soul.”

That two-day observance followed in 10 days by Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, reminded me a lot of our 40-day Lenten season beginning with Ash Wednesday. In both cases, we are invited to awaken our souls to thoughts, words, actions or inactions that prevent us from being a more pleasing offering to God.

More than in any other service throughout our church year, on Ash Wednesday we confess to a multitude of sins. Some we may not think we have committed, but this is not the time to try to justify ourselves before God. We admit to all of them in a spirit of humility. Greater humility is perhaps the best outcome we could have from this time in church today. The less full of ourselves we are, the greater chance there is that we can be useful to God and our neighbors.

During an Ash Wednesday service, a young girl attending with her mother, whispered a little too loudly, “Mom, I know I’m bad, but I am not that bad!” I’m sure she wasn’t that bad, nor are any of us, but we don’t come to Ash Wednesday church to get gold stars for good behavior.

Through the prophet Joel, God calls the people to, “...return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing.” Rending one’s clothing, tearing open one’s shirt, was a symbolic act of showing remorse. Maybe our similar symbolic act today is to receive a black smudge on our foreheads. The smudge once a year does no good whatsoever if we don’t leave here with a desire to change some aspect of our lives for the better.

“Have a changed heart and don’t just go around with dirt on your head for a day,” the prophet might say to us today.

At our Men’s Breakfast last Saturday, we watched a 30-minute interview with Richard Rohr about male spirituality. One of the many insightful things he said was a quote from Gregory of Nyssa, an early fourth century bishop. According to Richard Rohr, Gregory said, “Sin is simply this; the refusal to grow.” (repeat)

Ash Wednesday is that special day in the church year when we come to church to make a right start to the season of Lent. Lent is the season in which we intentionally examine our own lives critically, but not fatalistically. I can’t imagine that any of us here couldn’t name at least one behavior in ourselves that couldn’t use some adjusting or elimination altogether.

God is not so pleased when we say, “Heavenly Father, see how good I am.” I think God can’t wipe the smile off his face when we can say, “Dear Lord, I know I am far from perfect but with your constant love and help, I’ll keep working on a better me and a better world.”

I have a bad habit of multi-tasking when someone is talking to me. That does not communicate that I’m listening or that I care. This is something I will be examining and repenting of this year during Lent.

The kind of spiritual work we need to do throughout our lifetime, but especially during Lent is what might be called the “little deaths.” That is the battling or curbing of our egoism. As you know, that is when we have an excessive need to win, to be in control or to be praised. To be egotistical is to want to assume the central place. In the gospel today, Jesus commands us to keep our giving, praying and fasting in secret so we can’t use any of these holy disciplines to prove to others how really devout we are.

The ashes you and I may choose to receive in a few minutes are intended to communicate that we are in fact nothing.... nothing but dust and ashes without God’s grace. As St. Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

We might say as Christians that we have two lives bundled into one. The first is organic, visible, fragile yet resilient, and finite. When we are cut, we bleed. When we fall, we bruise or break. This life will end, and we will return to the ground – “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” as we say at the graveside.

Our other life is spiritual, invisible, fragile and yet enduring for eternity. If we ignore this one, it lies fallow and is useless.

Both lives are interconnected, however, as we are a whole person. Each of the two aspects of our lives contributes to the betterment or detriment of the other. Therefore, we need to tend to both with equal attention. Lent is that season when we pay particular attention to the spiritual side of our lives. We give it the attention we may have neglected throughout the rest of the year. The organic or bodily part of us can be very demanding, and that’s why a little denial or fasting during Lent helps get our lives back into a greater balance of body and spirit.

More than likely, we will end up this Lenten season feeling as though we didn’t give it our all, or we caved in to our bodily cravings. That’s not the end of the world if, as I said at the beginning, we turn out more humble and less impressed with ourselves.

A Lutheran pastor, Heidi Neumark, tells the story of a woman in her church who came to the communion rail one Sunday and asked, just as Heidi was putting the wafer in her hands, “Is there forgiveness in there?” Heidi said, “Yes, there is.” The woman replied, “That’s good because I sure need some.”

We will always need forgiveness as long as we are in these bodies of flesh. That’s the way it should be, and God has more of it than we could ever use up. So let your soul be awakened to even, and especially, the dirt within. AMEN.

