



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

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Ash Wednesday: February 26, 2020

Sermon Title: "The Reminders of Ash Wednesday"

Sermon Text: Isaiah 58:1-12

What does the Church hope to accomplish through the various rites and rituals of Ash Wednesday? Surely there's a plan, right? Surely there must be a reason why we make time in our busy lives for midweek worship, have ashes smeared on our foreheads, and walk around all day in such a conspicuous state. Because if there's no purpose, then this all seems a little silly. So why do we bother with Ash Wednesday?

I decided to ask that question of one of my seminary text books. It states that Ash Wednesday and in particular the "use of ashes reminds Christians of two central truths of the human condition. [First,] we are mortal... [and second,] we are sinners."¹

So is *that* our takeaway from Ash Wednesday? Certainly there's undeniable truth to both statements. It is self-evident that we humans are both mortal and sinful. I'm not sure we need Ash Wednesday to remind us of those two stark realities of the human condition.

Reminders of our mortality are all around us. Some have even argued that we live in a "culture of death." We see in the daily news how the value of life has been cheapened. We've become numb to the steady drumbeat of stories of people starving for lack of food and shelter, the torture and murder of political dissidents, and wars that do not distinguish between combatants and innocent bystanders. We poison our farmlands and water sources in the name of profit, and we either participate in or stand idly by, doing nothing, as countless atrocities are committed against the dignity of humanity. Life has become disposable.

But we're also aware of the very personal reminders of mortality that come with each ache and pain: the mortality of aging. Eventually, our bodies will wear out. The words we've heard tonight: "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return" – will become quite literally true for all of us and for our loved ones. We know that all too well from the many losses we've suffered here at Grace over the past months. I'm not sure we need Ash Wednesday to remind us that we are mortal. I think we know that.

By the same token, I think we're all aware of our sinfulness. As the first verse from our lesson from the prophet Isaiah states, there are moments when God calls us to shout out the reality of our sinfulness and not hold back. We may not be as quick to admit our sinfulness as we are our mortality. But deep inside, *we know*. In our heart, in our conscience, and in the thoughts that keep us awake at night, *we know*. We have fallen short. We've pushed God away. In what we've done and in what we've failed to do, we have injured our neighbors.

There are many causes for this, including greed, selfishness, insecurity, and fear, but the result is the same. We have broken our relationships with God and neighbor. Some of it has been committed person-to-person, face-to-face. But increasingly it has happened in the shadowy online world of places like Facebook and blogs, where we have combined the power of an electronic megaphone with the illusion of anonymity to demean and destroy our neighbor. And so again, I'm not sure we need Ash Wednesday to remind us that we are sinners. We know that, and the reality of our condition can so easily lead us to despair.

But with all due respect to my old textbook, I think Ash Wednesday offers us far more than just a reminder of our mortality and our sinfulness. We gather today to be reminded that despite those two undeniable things, *we are loved*. God loves us in spite of our brokenness, our limitations, and our sins. Our lesson from Isaiah provides blessed assurance of that love. God, who knows better than anyone how mortal and sinful we are nevertheless sees us with *eyes of love*, as the people we are capable of *becoming* rather than just the people *we are*. As Isaiah states, in God's eyes we have the beauty of "a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail." That's an image birthed from deep affection. And so on this Ash Wednesday, amidst the reminders of our mortality and sinfulness, be reminded as well that God loves you – persistently, completely, and eternally.

One of the most important fruits of God's love is God's forgiveness, which we've also heard on Ash Wednesday. Our mortality and sinfulness are not the authors of God's final judgment upon us. Just minutes ago, you heard Pr. Hetrick "declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins." Though she provided the voice for those words, make no mistake – those words come directly from God. *You are forgiven*. No longer be imprisoned by your sins. No longer be haunted by your misdeeds. God has forgiven you, and that forgiveness can be renewed daily. Tonight alone forgiveness will be reiterated not only in the words you heard, but in the body and blood of Jesus Christ which will mercifully fill you. As Isaiah suggests, God's love, so profoundly experienced in forgiveness, heals our sin-sick souls and enables God's light to shine from us like the dawn. What a blessing!

And so now let's return to the question I posed at the beginning of this sermon. What does the Church hope to accomplish through the various rites and rituals of Ash Wednesday? We've heard four answers: Ash Wednesday reminds us that we are *mortal*, we are *sinners*, we are *loved*, and we are *forgiven*. These four things all culminate in the *fifth and final reminder* that Ash Wednesday brings to us: as God's beloved and forgiven people, God invites us to live *transformed lives*.

A transformed life is a lofty notion that can sometimes seem unhelpfully ambiguous. What exactly does God have in mind? Once again, we turn to Isaiah, who provides a few examples of what a transformed life looks like. *First*, a transformed life isn't self-centered. Take your neighbor's needs into consideration. Be generous, kind, and decent, remembering that not everything is about us. *Second*, a transformed life is measured more by the way we treat one another than by the pious words we say. Words are cheap. Let your life of charity and mercy be your greatest sermon of love. *Third*, a transformed life opposes injustice. If someone is oppressed, defend her. If someone is hungry, feed him. If someone needs clothing or shelter, provide it. It's that simple.

Isaiah provides one more example of a transformed life, and if you heard nothing else in this sermon, hear this one, because I think it's needed more today than ever before. As the beloved and forgiven people of Jesus, we are called to be "repairers of the breach." What does that entail? It means that in these polarized and divided times, Jesus calls us to be ambassadors of love, listening, understanding, patient forbearance, and reconciliation. This work is more important than ever before, and should be the hallmark of Christian discipleship. Being repairers of the breach offers Christ's transformed *people* the best chance of transforming the *world*.

Friends, long after the ashes on our foreheads have faded away, I pray that the reminders of Ash Wednesday will persist in our hearts. We are mortal. We are sinners. We are loved. We are forgiven. And by God's grace, God invites us to live transformed lives. What a truly significant and blessed day this is. Thanks be to God! Amen.

¹ *Keeping Time: Using ELW, Vol. 3*, p. 85 (2009 Augsburg Fortress)