

Ash Wednesday Meditation  
Wednesday, February 18, 2015  
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God our helper, by your Holy Spirit open our minds and create in us clean hearts, that as the scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may be led into your truth, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our first reading is from the book of Isaiah, chapter 58, verses 1 through 12. The prophet scolds the soulless rituals of the day, pointing the people instead toward their responsibilities to those in need, and instructs that in caring for their poor and oppressed that the people of Israel will find anew their relationship with God.

Hear now God's holy word.

*1 Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. 2 Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. 3 "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. 4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. 5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? 6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? 8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. 9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, 10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. 11 The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. 12 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.*

Our second reading is from the gospel of Matthew, chapter six, verses 1 through 6 and 16 through 21. This portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is traditionally read on Ash Wednesday.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

*1 "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2 "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 5 "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*16 "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

This is the Word of the Lord.

Title of the meditation: Walking through Lent

For Lent eleven years ago, my mother announced she was giving up chemo.

For Ash Wednesday, she went shopping for her urn. Her parents went with her, and they didn't handle it very well. They didn't want to face the prospect of her death. But Mom, true to form, found humor in the whole situation—especially when she couldn't find a single urn she liked.

So she bought glass jars from IKEA and some brightly colored glass paint, marched her parents home, and set up an arts and crafts station at our kitchen table. The three of them spent several hours painting the jars that would, a month and a half later, hold her ashes.

Though her timing was based mostly on the progress of her disease, my mother's choice of season was fitting. Ash Wednesday had always been a profound and solemn day for our family.

With the rest of our small congregation, we would gather on that Wednesday evening in a darkened church and mark each other with the sign of the cross with the whispered words—

—Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

As a little girl, I would stand there self-consciously as my father gravely, with tears in his eyes and a smile full of love, marked my forehead with ashes and reminded me that I will die. And then I would take the ashes, and turn to the next person, always an adult, reaching up as they bent down, to do the same—and I felt solemn, and serious, and a part of something so much bigger than myself, something mysterious, and joyful, and weighty, and holy.

But it always strikes me as somewhat odd that, on this day when we mark our heads or hands with ashes, when we participate in this mysterious, joyful, and holy ritual, we read two passages that condemn visible signs of piety. Isaiah says scornfully, "Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?" In Matthew, Jesus warns, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them."

It is confusing, and is one of the reasons our tradition gave up Ash Wednesday for many, many years.

But I am glad we have reclaimed it.

Both Isaiah and Matthew speak out against a piety of hypocrisy, of going through motions of faith in order to boost one's image.

The words of the prophet and the teachings of the Christ that we read tonight challenge us to turn away from convention—to stop worrying about what others think or how we appear—to not be concerned with what others think of our prayers or our offerings.

Instead, we are called by these scriptures to turn to God; to cry out for help to the One who will not judge our prayers, but hear them. These scriptures call us back to our relationship with God, rather than our relationship to the expectations of society and the secular world, and in calling us back to our God, these passages recall us to our humanity.

And so it seems fitting that today we mark ourselves with ashes. For ashes are no longer a part of convention, no longer an everyday kind of piety. And our society and secular world refuse to admit the existence of death, and the fact of our mortality.

So, we mark ourselves with ashes only this one day each year, and remind each other to turn to God, and remember that we are God's children, beloved, frail, forgiven,—and mortal.

On that Ash Wednesday eleven years ago, as my mother and grandparents painted the jars that would soon hold my mother's ashes, they were profoundly aware of the inevitable use of these jars. But their paintings were not grim or sad or dark.

They were joyful.

My mother and grandparents painted the jars bright white--wrote her name in cheerful red, painted a sunny bed of flowers.

They were preparing for death, with reminders of mortality all around. And yet, in my mother's strange approach to this preparation, she celebrated the hope that resides even in—especially in—death.

Another Ash Wednesday is here. It is the beginning of Lent, a journey we take each year with Christians all over the world, a long walk that will lead us to the cross. Tonight, with the Imposition of the Ashes, we recognize our humanity, and our mortality. Death happens to all of us.

But this is not the end, and the cross will not be the final word—Easter will come.

We just have to get through the hard part first.

The reality of death is inescapable. My mother realized that, and she prepared for death, and painted jars to hold her ashes. But death contains hope, because death leads to the resurrection.

And when she and my grandparents were finished, the jars looked like Mother's Day gifts—bright and festive and spring-like.

When she died, we were glad to see those jars again. Ashes they might hold, but they also made us smile, reminding us that Easter does follow Lent, that death is followed by the resurrection.

Here at the beginning of Lenten journey, we admit our mortality. We prepare for the loneliness of the wilderness. We acknowledge death. These ashes remind us that we all will die.

But I can't see ashes now without thinking of those brightly-painted jars and remembering that Easter is coming. Tonight, as we turn to God and remember our humanity, we participate in something bigger than each of us, something mysterious, and weighty, and joyful, and holy.

For the way to the joy of the resurrection is by walking through the wilderness, and through this day of ashes.