

March 1, 2017:

Ash Wednesday Meditation: Connecting with Ashes



I've done enough interments in our Memorial Garden to know the weight and feel of ashes. The remains of a life full of laughter and relationships, love and challenges along the way, reduced to powdery remains. Ashes remind us of the fragility and fleeting nature of life on earth. Our mortality is something we like to think about very often, but on this holy day, which launches us into our Lenten Season of spiritual reflection and preparation, we look to ashes to remember our own mortality; to remember that we have come from the dust of the earth, and one day, to dust and ash we shall return. The cycle of life and death is unstoppable, and completely natural. Our lives on this earth are limited, and we never know when our time is up... which compels us to make each moment count. Remembering our mortality on this holy day reminds me that time is short and there is no time like the present to right wrongs that are weighing on my heart, to make amends for past hurts, to ask for forgiveness and seek reconciliation where brokenness and division exist. To repent and turn back to a right relationship with God and my neighbors.

The reality of death and the need for repentance go hand-in-hand for many Christians, especially as we move into the season of Lent. Many were raised with fear of post-death judgment, imagining the pearly gates guarded by St. Peter, checking to see if we are on the list to get into heaven or be sent to hell to burn for eternity. With this image of judgment in mind, repentance and "cleaning up your act" has an eternal reward or consequence, and since none of us knows when we will die, it is wise, prudent and necessary to repent now... not wasting a single moment, for death and judgment might be near. In this understanding, it's important to be right with God when we die – for we risk divine and maybe eternal punishment if we're not.

For me, death and repentance as themes for Ash Wednesday and Lent don't hold a heaven verses hell fear. I don't believe that the heart of Christianity is about life AFTER death, our eternal fate in heaven or hell, but instead more about the Kingdom of God lived out here and now, in this life. While I do believe in eternal life after death, faithful living should be focused on this life, not the next. I struggle with the call to repentance, simply so that our eternal state might be better. Instead, I believe the call to repentance leads to interactions and relationships with God and others that reflect the righteousness and justice of God, here and now, in this life.

Ash Wednesday, Lent, Holy Week, and Christianity itself are about more than what happens when we die... they are about following Jesus on the path that leads through death to resurrection. They are about dying and rising with Christ. We are to follow him to Jerusalem, the place of death and resurrection, so that we too might participate in resurrection of our own spirits and the world around us. That is what the journey of Lent is all about.

That journey intrinsically involves repentance. But repentance is not primarily about feeling guilty about our sins, or about doing penance, making amends for our past

wrongs – but about a transformation of heart and life, a re-centering in Christ’s love lived out in every aspect of our lives. The biblical meanings of repenting are twofold. On the one hand, it means to “return” to God, to “reconnect” with God. On the other hand, it means “to go beyond the mind that we have” – minds shaped by our interactions and culture. To exceed the limits that bind us and live into the perfect love of Christ. That is the resurrection that we are called to live out each day.

In this season of penance and repentance, it is traditional to give up something during Lent – whether meat or chocolate or shopping – but usually these things we give up have nothing to do with the transformation and “going beyond ourselves” that is necessary for resurrection. Instead, during this Lenten season, how about considering a fast from the things that tear us and others down, freeing us to focus on healthy and loving relationships? As Pope Francis has invited, how about we consider fasting from hurting words, to say kind words. Fasting from sadness, to be filled with gratitude. Fasting from anger, to be filled with patience. Fasting from pessimism, to be filled with hope. Fasting from worries, to have trust in God. Fasting from complaints, to contemplate simplicity. Fasting from pressures, to be prayerful. Fasting from bitterness, to fill your hearts with joy. Fasting from selfishness, to be compassionate to others. Fasting from grudges, to be reconciled. Fasting from words, to be silent and listen.

These are the types of Lenten fasts that would bring about a transformation of heart and life, repentance in action, impacting our relationships with God and those around us. I invite you, during this season of Lent, to work toward this kind of transformation, this way of living, so that when Holy Week and Easter approach, we can experience Christ’s resurrection in our own lives, and live it out in the world around us. Amen.