



Ash Wednesday Reflections

Exodus 16:2-8; Mark 1:9-13

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February 18, 2015

Lent is a very meaningful season of the church year for me personally. From 1986 through 1997, I was a full-time college student (a full time wife and mother, and a part-time daycare provider) working my way through a bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees. All the years that I was studying, Lent always coincided with the time when students applied for scholarships, research and teaching assistantships. The applications were due early in February and the results were announced at the end of the semester in April. Lent for me, in those years, was about waiting — waiting to know if I would have a scholarship or research assistantship or teaching assistantship that would pay for my studies the following year. Lent for me, in those years, was about waiting - waiting anxiously, nervously, apprehensively to know if I would be able to continue studying. Lent for me, in those years, was more like the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness. Sometimes it felt like the waiting to know the fate of my studies would kill me. As each year passed, and the scholarships and assistantships came in regular as manna on the morning dew, the waiting became less anxious, less apprehensive. It was still waiting, but there was more expectation, anticipation and hope. Lent was still about being in the wilderness but it became more like Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness. Less about survival and more about discernment. More about figuring out how to take the next step. Looking back on those years I learned to trust God, and to rely on the angels that minister to us in the midst our wilderness experiences.

Today I see Lent as an opportunity to return to the Lord — to deepen my relationship with my Savior — by following Jesus more intentionally and deliberately. Jesus' coming among us as a baby in a manger, Jesus' fasting in the desert, Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, teach us that God changes the world not through power and might but through humility and service. God changes us the same way. We will not become our child-of-God selves by chasing power and prestige, but by embracing humility, vulnerability and service. Lent provides us with an opportunity to do that by engaging in three ancient spiritual practices: fasting, giving, and praying.



Prayer is about our relationship with God. Prayer is time spent with God - listening, talking, singing, walking, hanging out — because we need someone to share with. Giving is about our relationships with other people. Giving is about giving away our time, our energy, our talents, and our resources to benefit other people. Fasting is about our relationship with our selves. Fasting reminds us that it's not all about us, that there may be more important

things than our desires, our appetites, even our aspirations.

This Lent we are lifting up the practices of fasting and giving. Our worship, learning and serving will focus on solidarity with the hungry and poor. I would like to invite all of you to participate as you are able - with an emphasis on as you are able. Our **Lenten Suppers** in the coming weeks will feature simple ordinary meals eaten by our sisters and brothers in Palestine, Tanzania, Colombia and Haiti. I encourage you to pick up “**Living Simply with God Hunger Calendar**” and a “**Feed the World**” coin box. The calendar has an easy activity for each day of Lent with suggestions how to fill up the coin box. When it’s full bring it to church and we’ll send your coins to ELCA World Hunger.

If you are looking to go deeper in your Lenten spiritual discipline and seriously stretch yourself, you might consider Chris Seay’s challenge in ***A Place at the Table: 40 Days of Solidarity with the Poor***. He invites us to “eat like the poor for 40 days and donate the money” we save on to a charity or project that serves the poor. To learn more, join Vicar Aleese and me after the worship service, and/or participate in the Adult Learning Session on Sunday mornings. Whether or not you take up this challenge to engage in a fast you can use the book as a Lenten devotional. All these resources are available at our Lenten resource table in the narthex.

Ash Wednesday is about accepting and embracing the whole truth about our selves. It begins with the confession that we are not righteous, that we are not living in right relations with God, with other people, not even with ourselves. Lent is a time for us to reflect on the reality that God gives us people to love and things to use, but all too often we love things and use people. The result is that some of us do not have enough, while others have more than enough.

At the end of our confession, we are marked with a cross of ashes, and hear the words “You are dust and to dust you shall return.” We are mortal beings with limits. There is no getting around this reality. All of us are headed to the same address – a grave. Even the hope of resurrection does not spare us from this truth. A grave will be our resting place, if not for all of eternity, certainly until Christ returns and the worlds are remade.

But Ash Wednesday does not end with those words - you are dust and to dust you shall return. Our service concludes with the sacrament of Holy Communion, which points us to another truth about ourselves. We may all be dust, destined for the grave, but we are dust that has been claimed by Christ, nourished at his table, washed in the waters of baptism, gifted with the Holy Spirit. We are dust that is in the process of being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

The cross of ashes with which we will be marked this evening symbolizes these truths about us. The ashes remind us what we are creatures of dust destined to return to the dust. The ashes remind us that our lives are out of alignment with God, with each others and even with ourselves. Some of us have more than enough, some of us don’t have enough. The ashes are a sign of our sorrow and grief in the face of these truths. The

ashes in the shape of a cross remind us that in spite of our brokenness and frailty we are not alone. Christ is with us and promises to heal and restore what is broken in our lives and in our relationships, so that everyone will have enough.

For those of us who have enough, and more than enough, may this Lent offer us an opportunity to learn about and respond to the needs of our brothers and sisters here and abroad. For those of us who do not have enough, I pray that this Lent will be an occasion to receive manna from heaven, an occasion to be ministered to by angels in the wilderness.

Amen.