

February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023

First Sunday of Lent

Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7

Psalm 32

Matthew 4: 1-11

**Matthew 4:1-11**

*Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written,*

*'One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*"

*Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,*

*'He will command his angels concerning you,'  
and 'On their hands they will bear you up,*

*so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'*"

*Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,*

*'Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.'*"

*Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

*In the name of the Holy Three. Amen.*

With Ash Wednesday this past week, we have entered the season of Lent. Our gospel reading speaks of Jesus, just after his baptism when the voice of God spoke from the skies: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”, just after that joy, Jesus immediately departs for the wilderness and 40 days of temptation by the devil.

Lent is the most solemn, the most essential season of our church year. Following the journey of Lent, walking the road to Jerusalem with Jesus, is crucial to our education, our spirit, our essence as Christians.

It is the season when we are most urgently called to learn more, to challenge our own complicity in going through the motions of our faith, without living our faith.

Lent is our yearly call to answer the question of what we most deeply believe. Lent is our yearly call to ponder, if a stranger looked at a day in our lives, at the living of our lives, could they see our faith in action?

Noting the centrality of Lent to our lives as Christians, I have been puzzled by Ash Wednesday since I became a Christian 37 years ago.

In those 37 years, and no matter how large the church, and no matter what time of day a service was offered, I have never seen a well-attended Ash Wednesday service. In fact, I have observed that most folks do not attend them.

So, what is up with Ash Wednesday? As it is the start of Lent, the gateway into this most crucial season, why do we pass on this service?

I have a few thoughts to share, and I welcome yours if you have ever pondered this question.

First, I realize that the service and the ashes focus us on two things we might not want to think about: mortality and humbleness. The ashes are imposed to the words:

*“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”*

The ashes and the words remind us that we are mortal, we have a lifetime, and we will die someday, and that our mortal bodies will return to the earth, and eventually decay to dust.

And the Ash Wednesday readings and prayers call us to repent and to remember that as Christians we are called to be humble, to not elevate ourselves, but to care for others, to give our energy not to being important, but to being compassionate.

We are called to walk with Jesus to Jerusalem, knowing his suffering and death ahead on the cross, and our call not to run away from his pain, his agony and his earthly mortality, but to stay with him.

And we are called to see Jesus' humbleness, how he does not yell louder than the Sanhedrin or the Roman leaders, how he does not argue his case or demand his release, and how he does not use his power, but is humble in the face of evil and hate.

In our daily lives where youth is worshipped, and Botox and age-defying are marketed, and in our daily lives where having power is exalted and being number one is rewarded, the Ash Wednesday service focused on mortality and humbleness may seem startling and strange.

So, I ask again, what is up with Ash Wednesday? As it is the start of Lent, the gateway into this most crucial season, why do we pass on this service?

A second reason I see may be that the Ash Wednesday service is very dense, wordy, and complex.

To me the words of this service have always felt like a flood overtaking me, so many of them I can't hear any of them.

And so, in the flood we miss the crucial.

The entire Ash Wednesday service is built around not a requirement, not an order, but an invitation.

An invitation to observe a holy Lent.

Just before the ashes are offered, the leader says:

*I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the*

*observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now kneel before the Lord, our maker and redeemer.*

I invite you.....

An invitation.....

A door is opened, a hand is offered, and we are invited in.

So, what do we do with Ash Wednesday?

As it is the start of Lent, the gateway into this most crucial season, why do we pass on this service?

And thus, we come to the yes, odd new practice of what has been called for the past several years Ashes To Go. In the cities, churches have been offering Ashes to Go, going to the subway platforms and the bus stops and bringing the ashes to the people.

Here in our rural county, Trinity started offering our own version last year called, Drive-Thru Ashes.

I had suggested this idea before Covid and honestly, and understandably, the Trinity Vestry at that point looked at me like I was crazy, crazy and maybe a bit embarrassing.

But last year, after the Covid pandemic had upended our worship practices and we had had Ash Wednesday on Zoom, new ideas did not seem so odd.

And we had our first Drive Thru Ashes.

And what struck me was the variety of reasons folks found us, last year and this year.

People came to the drive thru because walking is difficult. People came to

the drive thru because their schedule did not allow them to get to a full service. People came to the drive through because they were here from out of town, visiting a very ill relative.

Last year Deb joined me for Drive Thru Ashes. This year, with Deb out of town, Jennifer Ambrosino a new Vestry member at Trinity, joined me.

We would greet each car, welcome folks and visit a little, then explain that after we imposed the ashes, we would be glad to pray with them about a person a situation, a worry in their lives.

No one turned us down.

People are hungry for community and have much on their hearts.

We held hands, we made a circle, where 2 or 3 are gathered.....

And we were busy; we planned for an hour, but started early and ended late, going 90 minutes. At one of the last cars, a comment was offered that has stayed with me that made me ponder again the question of Ash Wednesday services.

This person said they were so glad we were still there, and how much they wanted to get their ashes.

They went on to say: "The ritual means so much, to receive the ashes. Really more than the service, probably."

Honest words from a lifelong and devout Christian, speaking to our need to yes, enter into Lent, with less words, accepting the invitation to a holy Lent, with a ritual we cannot and do not want to ignore, a reminder on our face, and making us face our mortality and our call to be humble.

To be the peculiar Christians, in this world but not of it, following our brother Jesus who walked before us in living and in dying, in humbleness and love.

Amen.

