

Sermon February 17, 2021 Ash Wednesday 2021

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Well, here we are the outset of yet another Lent! Good Christians have been taking on Lent's mantle since the 3rd or 4th century. That's a long tradition in the church – one of the very longest. Fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are intensified along with a rekindled sense that we like sheep have all gone astray, each to his own way. Enough of that! Today we get back to the basics of repentance, self-denial, and Christian service. We rededicate ourselves to the Lord in concert with all the catechumens whose instruction was ramped up at this time of year to realize its climax in baptism at the easter vigil.

And then there Are the Ashes – the namesake of today's observance. The western church has been using ashes on this first day of Lent since around 1000 AD. Where did the ashes come from? The ashes themselves come from palm branches once waved on Palm Sunday. But the intent of using the ashes dates back millennia. Job, the oldest book in the Bible, records Job sitting in ashes in repentance for anything he may have said or done contrary to the Lord. When Jonah got spit back up on the shore and preached his warning of destruction against Nineveh, every man, woman, child, and animal bore ashes signifying their repentance from past ungodliness and an intent on making good on their promise to live in ways that were moral and just. There was a custom of laying the dying on a bed of sackcloth, covering them with ashes, and leading them to a personal confession that they were wholly content with whatever the Lord may deliver to them, including death. Ashes were also sprinkled on those who were guilty of severe sins such as adultery or violence, along with those who had renounced the faith and now desired to come back home to the church.

Are ashes still relevant today? I'm open to suggestions on an even more intense way to begin this season of repentance. Until then, ashes, a visual remembrance of what once was, serve to represent the right things we have done for the wrong reasons, the wrong things we have done for the right reasons, and every other transgression in between.

From ashes we move on to the disciplines of Lent: repentance, fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. We practice these in earnest, seeking to rededicate ourselves as disciples of Jesus. Did Jesus fast? Yes. Pray? Obviously. Help the poor? On every occasion. However, did Jesus repent? Nope. He didn't have to. As the pure Son of God, Jesus was without sin. Jesus did not repent from sin. Rather he went even further down the road of ashes – Jesus *became* sin. As we hear in Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth;

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21

This is the great reversal. Jesus became every sinner in order that every sinner might become holy and fit for life in his kingdom. How does Jesus do this for us? When we turn from our ungodliness and trust that in our baptism we have been clothed with Christ with a covering not

of ashes but a garment woven with the good works of Jesus Christ that he performed on our behalf. And when we eat and drink of his body and blood given and shed for us on the cross, we receive the fruits of his cross that cleanse us from all sin and make us one with him who is the resurrection and the life.

God bless you with true repentance, faith, and service this Lent and always as his peace guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.