

"From Ashes. . ."
First Congregational Church of Wauwatosa
Rev. Steven A. Peay, Ph.D.
Ash Wednesday/21 February 1996
[texts: 2 Cor. 5:20-6:2/Mt. 6:1-6,6-18]

"Ashes to ashes. Dust to Dust."

One of the most pervasive images in the Scripture is ashes. We read of those seeking repentance or mourning a loss dressing in sackcloth and covering themselves with ashes. Why would anyone want to do this? What possible good can come from ashes?

After all, ashes are the charred remnants of something else. They've been through the fire and are reduced to almost the lowest level. Yet it is when we realize that, their significance becomes obvious. They are reminders of human frailty, of our mortality, of our dependence upon the Creator who can make us out of those ashes, the dust of the ground. The early Church picked up on this powerful image and the penitent continued to wear ashes as a sign of their contrition. But, this was a private observance. How did we get "Ash Wednesday" as the beginning of the Lenten season?

The season of Lent only began to take shape in the latter half of the fourth century. It began as an intensive period of preparation for those who would be baptized at Easter. When it began to be extended to all Christians it lasted six weeks, beginning on the first Sunday -- exactly forty days before the 'Triduum' or 'three days' leading up to Easter -- as it continues in the Orthodox East to this day. In the West, however, Sundays were not kept as fast days, so they were four short of imitating Jesus' fast of forty days in the wilderness. Thus, to have forty days of fast the observance of the Wednesday before the first Sunday as the beginning of Lent commenced in the sixth century. The use of ashes on that Wednesday began somewhere in the Rhineland in the tenth century and only became customary throughout the Western Church in the thirteenth century.

The stress on the day -- as on the whole season of Lent -- was and is penitence. Throughout the Western Christian world today, where the season is observed, people will pause to meditate on their need for repentance. This need not be a negative thing, a 'downer' if you will. The image of an ash-strewn, gaunt ascetic living in the wilderness is very difficult to identify with; especially for people at the end of the twentieth century. Yet, when we read what these ascetics have written we discover that they were hardly filled with doom and gloom. Rather, they radiated joy and peace. Why?

Perhaps because they had discovered the truth of Paul's invitation to reconciliation with God in Jesus Christ? In doing so the believer enters into the 'eternal

now' of God's presence and all time -- past, present, and future -- is continually summed-up in the moment with God. They know deep within their being the truth of God's self-identification with us in Jesus, he "who knew no sin" but "became sin" for us so that we might become "the very holiness of God."

In order to come to that experience, these journeyers along the path of Christian life tell us, we must empty ourselves so that "very holiness of God" can fill us. The means to that emptiness are the traditional Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. As Augustine wrote:

By almsgiving and fasting we add wings of fervor to our prayers so that they may more easily fly up and reach God. . . . Through humility and charity, fasting and almsgiving, abstaining and forgiving, avoiding evil and doing good, our prayer seeks peace and achieves it. For such prayer takes its flight on the wings lent it by these virtues and easily reaches heaven, where Christ our peace has gone on ahead.

As Jesus teaches us, we do not do these things to call attention to ourselves, to demonstrate our piety. To do so would be self-defeating, as the Gospel says, "they have their reward already." The goal of Christian life is not to please self, but God. Thus, our prayer and service of our sisters and brothers must be done in humility (that is, it is grounded) and with a minimum of fuss.

We are also reminded that our growth in Christ implies deepening in love for one another. John Chrysostom told his congregation in fourth century Constantinople that they should worry more about fasting from sin than from food. Leo told those in Rome, at the same time, "Beloved, remove the causes of discord and the thorns of enmity. Let hatred cease and rivalries disappear, and let all the members of Christ meet in loving unity." He also reminded us of what we take on ourselves when we pray the Lord's prayer: "If we say, 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,' but do not act according to our words, we fasten heavy chains upon ourselves."

Lent, then, is a time for us to take stock of how we are accomplishing the task of "becoming the very holiness of God." It is an extended time of retreat and renewal. A time, I believe, for us to "take-up" more than we "give-up" and experience the love and peace Christ offers to those who would follow him. Consider some of the positive things which can be accomplished during this season. Take time each day to do some reading in the Scripture, meditate on it, and offer prayer. [The little Lenten devotional book produced by the Congregation could serve as a springboard.] Take some time to do some reading in some spiritual book or involve yourself in some aspect of spiritual education. If you decide to fast from something, have some positive object to which the fasting is directed -- traditionally fasting was done to sharpen one's focus on spiritual

rather than material things. Perhaps we can try to have a more positive outlook toward a neighbor or coworker who annoys us or even seek to be less annoying ourselves? There are so many things we can "take-up," we can soon begin to give things up fairly easily. The goal of the Christian life -- the give-up and the take-up -- is simply to be filled with God and it begins with being self-reflective.

If we meditate on our sinfulness and our mortality it is not without hope, or the possibility of reconciliation in view. Every day is the acceptable one for us to begin to change. Lent, which derives from the Old English word 'lencten,' means 'spring.' It should be a springtime of spiritual growth as we journey with Jesus toward the rebirth that is Easter.

Ashes, symbolic of frailty and contrition, also make wonderful fertilizer. One of the most powerful images of renewal I've ever seen was, in the midst of all the destruction wrought by Mount Saint Helen's, there growing out of the ash were wildflowers and a pine sapling. From ashes can come life. . . . from ashes can come life.