

Sermon for Ash Wednesday  
March 5, 2025  
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This Ash Wednesday is unlike any I've experienced. Perhaps it is the same for you as well. For three weeks in January, we were surrounded by fires, burning uncontrollably, destroying whole communities... homes, businesses, livelihoods, including those of people we know and love, gone up in flame and turned to ash. Lives literally left in the dust. It made working on my Ash Wednesday sermon difficult, to say the least, because there's a whole new complexity this year to talking about ashes and repentance. How dare I, relatively untouched by the fires, stand here and talk about the meaning of ashes to those whose lives, whose hopes and dreams, were turned to cinders, and who now wander in a maze of red tape and uncertainty?

As I tried to think what I could say that would have any meaning, I began musing about something I'd never thought of before – and that's how people throughout history, until very recently, lived intimately with fire all the time. It's only been a few generations that have had safe stoves and ovens and heating systems, rather than open fires and hearths. Only a few generations who have not always been at risk of death and destruction through fire, and who have not to deal with ashes all the time: scooping them out of the fire pit to lay the next fire, putting the ashes in the fields and gardens for the nutrients, making time daily to clean the hearth and everything else that's been covered with a film of ash and smoke. Most of our ancestors lived in the midst of fire and ash and knew, without a doubt, that one of humanity's greatest tools was also one of its greatest dangers, and could never be taken for granted.

These recent events have made me think about all the layers of what we do on Ash Wednesday every year. We put ashes on our heads as our ancestors did when someone they loved died, reminding ourselves that this world is transitory, that we are transitory, made of dust and one day returning to dust. One day we too will be used up and swept away, our bodies returned to the earth or turned to ash, our lives whispering away on the winds of time... and all that will be left will be the memory of what we did, for good and for ill. Did we leave the world a better place than what we found? Did we, in the words of the Baptismal Covenant, persevere in resisting evil; proclaim the good news of God in Christ rather than promoting the transitory pleasures of the world; seek and serve Christ in all persons, especially those on the margins; strive for justice and peace for everyone, regardless of their origin, identity, language; respect the dignity of every human being? Did we, in the words of the song, "fill the world with love our whole lives through"? Or did we instead add our shovelful of ashes to the pile of ashes that every civilization eventually becomes?

If we are honest with ourselves, we will probably say that we did a little of both. And that is exactly why we are here today, and why we take this time of Lent to honestly and deliberately look at ourselves and see where we can do better. Because this is the time of year – and perhaps the one time of the year, to our shame – that Christians honestly take stock of how well we follow Christ’s teachings, rather than the call of the world. All of us, even those of us who truly try to live as Christians every day, fall short, because we’re human. The question is whether we make the “falling short” times as small as possible, whether we try to discipline ourselves to make our lives and the world around us the best they can possibly be, with God’s help. Remember that “discipline” means being a disciple, living as a student and always following the Master, rather than thinking at some point that we know it all and we can relax, because we’re as good as we’ll get. Lent is a time for remembering that we always have more to learn and ways to improve, and then hopefully carrying that forward into the rest of life.

This is not just our problem. This is humanity’s problem since time immemorial. Look at what Isaiah says to his people, as he calls them to repentance: “You serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers. You fast only to quarrel and fight and to strike with a wicked fist.” You do all this instead of what God really wants: Loosing the bonds of injustice. Letting the oppressed go free. Breaking the yokes that place burdens on those who are less fortunate. Sharing our food and our clothing and our very homes with those in desperate need. Silencing the voices of evil so that the voices of peace can be heard. Being water in the garden for the thirsty.

Maybe these words strike you a little harder this year, in the midst of real destruction from the fires. Maybe these words strike you a little harder this year, as we see social systems that have stood for decades being systematically dismantled to benefit the rich and oppress the poor in our society. Maybe you’re scared of what might come next, for yourself or your neighbor. Maybe you’re feeling like we really are experiencing the beginning of the end of the world, and that all we do is useless, because we are broken beyond repair.

If you feel anything like that, know that I’m right there with you. I’m feeling pretty broken myself right now, both personally and professionally. And maybe... just maybe... this is the lesson of Lent this year, for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see and hearts to believe that even if we’re broken, it is not beyond repair, because God is still with us. Maybe one of the best, and most honest, and hardest, things we can do right now is to face up to what we’re facing: to look around us and name our brokenness, name what we’ve lost on a personal, community, and national level... and to use this as a starting point for doing much more in terms of relying on God and much less on ourselves and our strength; to commit, not just this Lent but for the rest

of our lives, to living into God's call to mend what is broken and supporting each other in our brokenness. And to realize that we are not safe, and we never have been, and we need to perhaps lay aside the idea of "safe lives" and instead work on lives of service, no matter what difficulties might lie ahead as we serve God and not Caesar.

We're all struggling right now through the ashes of what has been, sifting through the past and the present and trying to find value, looking for the little glimmers of God-light that are still with us in the ashes. I pledge you this: we will find value, not in social standing or one-upsmanship, but in community work, being the people of God in this place; we will find value in honest evaluation of what we've done, both good and bad, and what we need to improve; we will find value in a continuing and deepening trust in God who is with us in the midst of the dust and ashes, helping us form "new and contrite hearts" which are needed for new life – and not just our life but the lives of our communities, the country, and the world. On this day when we acknowledge loss and grief, when we remember that we are but dust, let us all commit to taking this opportunity to work for the treasures of heaven, so that with God's help, we can build our corner of the world into what it's meant to be: turning an ash heap of broken dreams and promises for haves and have-nots alike into a garden of mutual delight, mutual help, and mutual responsibility.

Amen.