

Ash Wednesday 2024

Ashes: Mortality and Penitence

By the Rev. Salying Wong

What is Ash Wednesday? It is the first day of a church season called Lent. The service for today uses ashes to signify two heavy themes: mortality and penitence. First, the ashes are from the Old Testament use of ashes to signify grief, namely here for grief of wrong-doing. Second, the ashes signify the dust of the earth, from which humanity was created and from which we return when we die. With such heaviness, it is fair to ask, “How am I to understand these themes as they are related to me?” And, what about their inverse—life and joy? Is there room for life and joy in this season called Lent?

First, a little history. Back in the early church (before 500 AD), the communities that gathered together to worship Jesus would occasionally have people in those communities that caused harm. Perhaps, they stole or performed an act of violence against another member of the church. Some of them caused such egregious harm to the community that they were kicked out. If they wanted to return to the community, they would have to undergo a time of public penitence. This penitence could include wearing sackcloth and ashes to show their grief for what they had done, just like people in the Old Testament. After a period, they would be reinstated.

Eventually, this act of public penitence was associated with a season of penitence called Lent, and the penitent would be reinstated at Easter. The church has an on-and-off-again relationship to this Ash Wednesday Service—going in and out of authorized prayer books. Sometimes, penitence was done more throughout the year rather than at a specific season. Today, our prayer book has this service. Its focus is not on the grievous sinner, specifically. Rather, it understands that we all have fallen short individually and corporately and are in need of forgiveness and repair.

In addition to the theme of penitence, the current Ash Wednesday service also includes the theme of mortality. The ashes that are put on our foreheads are a memento mori that this life is short.

I think a lot of people are uncomfortable with these themes. What, am I such a big sinner, that I have to give up chocolate for 40 days? I encourage you to consider this season of Lent not as a time to grovel and tell yourself how bad you are, but to take it as a time of self-examination to see how God would help you repair breaches in relationships, with yourself, your family, your neighbor, the stranger or your enemy. This is not easy work, but it is work that can give your life joy through healing. What is one heartache that you wish God to heal? Perhaps you can spend the next forty days doing some brave work to help God give you the healing you wish.

The reality is that life is short. This helps us understand that some things that break our hearts can be attended to, not tomorrow, but today. It helps to have a deadline. This is why I will say, if you come up for ashes, "Remember you are but dust, and to dust you shall return." So, I will now invite you to a Holy Lent.