

Ash Wednesday, Year A  
The Very Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
February 22, 2023  
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17  
Psalm 103  
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

## A Holy Lent

Isn't it the strangest thing that we read a gospel about not practicing our piety before others on a day when we walk around with ashes on our foreheads having people say all day long, "You have something on your head"? It seems a little bit of a contradiction, just like these readings all put together seem to contradict one another.

Joel says, *blow a trumpet in Zion, sound the alarm*, get people's attention. And Jesus says, don't blow your own horn. What's going on in between these? And what's going on with Paul our patron who says in his letter to the Corinthians, now, *now is the acceptable time; today is the day of salvation*.

These are the readings we have every year, every Ash Wednesday. It's safe to say the readings have a lot of tensions between them, for sure. What is going on? And what does any of that have to do with this day which is the official first day of the season of Lent? And what is Lent about? And what are these ashes about? And we are here because we know it's a holy day of obligation, but really, how does it connect to our lives at this stage, if it connects at all?

There's a lot of confusion about Lent, about giving things up and taking things up. There's a lot of confusion about what does it really mean to practice penitence. Our English word penitence is really a bad translation of what Jesus and those spreading his message, including St Paul, were trying to get everybody to do, which is not feel bad for not having been better but be open, constantly, to changing your mind and to receiving ongoing new learning, new guidance from the Holy One.

So, when you think about penitence think about changing your mind. The Greek word for that is *metanoia*.

And then when we think about this day and these ashes and this call that we'll hear in just a few minutes when I invite on behalf of the Church to the observance of a holy Lent, what might that mean?

What is up with these ashes? Did you know for the first 600 years of the Jesus movement, of Christianity, there was no Ash Wednesday? There was no ritual of ashes. But now we have it, and it's so deeply entrenched. Maybe we know what it's about, and maybe we don't. But maybe we could think about it in a fresh way. We know it's powerful; we know it's meaningful. Did you know that ash is one of the single most nutritious things to nurture the growth of plants? So, when we impose ashes, which is kind of an anointing with ashes, one way to think of that is we are praying a physical, visible prayer that we will continue to grow in Christ in this season in particular.

The words you hear as ashes are imposed—do you know them by heart?  
*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Recuerda que eres polvo y al polvo volverás.* These ashes, like the verbal invitation, are an invitation to the observance of a holy Lent, and I'll suggest, in three ways.

As we come and pause and slightly bow our heads to receive these ashes, what are we doing? At least these three things: we are expressing humility; we are confessing mortality; and we are marking, literally marking, the beginning of a holy Lent.

Express humility. Our word in English *humility* comes from the same root as *humous*, meaning soil. When we are truly humble, we recognize that we are creatures made from the dust of the earth. We remember that to dust we will return. And we also remember, and maybe this will help your practices during Lent, we remember that we are stewards of the earth, that is, God's creation. How might we practice that well in this season? What does it mean to be entrusted with the care of all creation? What are we called to as individuals and communities in this time of climate crisis.

Express humility. Remember that we are creatures, not the Creator. Remember also we are beloved by that Creator who loves not only us but all the creatures of this world.

Express humility. Confess mortality. I know you already know, but I'm going to remind you: nobody gets out of this alive. With the possible exceptions of Elijah and Enoch, the mortality rate is 100%. This life is the life we have now. We

believe there is more life to come. But to get to that life that is to come, we do, in fact, pass through death as did our Savior who set the example that death is not the end. It is an end, but it is not the end. The end of something, the beginning of something else. What does it mean to live with the awareness that this time is all we have? As a French author said, remembering that life is short and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us. So we should make haste to be kind and be swift to love.

Express humility. Confess mortality. Mark the beginning of a holy Lent. As you begin this Lenten season, how will you keep it throughout these forty days plus Sundays until we get to the great days of Easter. Many times we hear we should give something up; other times we hear we should take something up. The thing is not to deprive ourselves of love and life and joy but rather to get rid of things are impediments to or obstacles to our life and love and joy, to get in better alignment with the kinds of lives we want to live following the example of Jesus Christ our Savior.

So, should you give something up? Maybe. Should you take something new up? Maybe. It takes thirty days, they say, to form a new habit. You've got more than thirty days if you practice something new in Lent. If it's a good habit you've intended to take up, maybe this is your chance to get a head start and form that habit.

Since it's a day when we're doing a lot of confessing, I will confess that I really, really love British police procedural dramas. I love them. I find them enormously satisfying: they have a beginning, a middle, and an end. It resets the brain. It's nice, right? Move through and have a conclusion.

The reality is that I like them so much that I probably watch more of them than is adequate. And so, in this season, what I've decided is not to watch them not because I don't love them but because I want to spend the time I might spend watching them doing something else that I know will be of benefit to me. So, I am giving up British police procedurals, even though they bring me joy, and I am taking up, literally taking up, old-school books. I read a lot on my phone, but I'm talking about old-school books. I have a few of them set aside, and the time that I would've been sitting in front of my widescreen TV—I'll probably sit in the same space, but I'm gonna read actual books as a spiritual practice of reading during this season.

So, those are examples of what I'm about and what I will be doing. Maybe you have something similar. *You know, I've been wanting to do that.* Use this season as a space to take up that new thing. And if there's something you really need to let go of, that you've been dragging around for way too long, use this season as a time to let that go. You don't need to keep lugging it around. Travel light and be in fellowship with those who travel with you.

I am particularly fond of our sister Episcopalian, the poet Mary Oliver, of blessed memory. I want to leave you with these words of one of her very most famous poems called *The Summer Day*. As you think about how you might keep a holy Lent, think about not only what you might do and what you might not do but also how you might pay attention. God is desirous of our attention, and this season creates a space where we might renew the attention, the focus that we place upon and give to God.

Mary Oliver, *The Summer Day*

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean —  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down —  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?