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Modified: Monday, March 4, 2019  
Year C, Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58:1-12  
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

## The Truths in the Ashes

- Sometimes it amazes me how well attended Ash Wednesday services are from year to year
  - Across all of services, including the preschool, more than 150 people will come through our door on a Wednesday
    - In the middle of the week, even when many hold full time jobs
    - That is close to an average Sunday attendance
  - And we all come knowing that this service is not the kind of service that will make us feel warm and fuzzy
  - Or good about ourselves, or even optimistic
  - We come to hear about our sin, our need for repentance, fasting, and our own mortality
  - Episcopalians are not accustomed to hearing sermons and liturgies like that at other times during the year
  - On some level, I am surprised that you, and everyone else chooses to come at all
- Yet on another level, perhaps the truths that we all come to hear today, the truths that we find in these ashes
  - Are some that we know we need to hear, even if it may sting a little
  - There is a sobering reality that we rarely encounter throughout the rest of the year, and we need it from time to time
  - We need these moments of real talk, when the pretense drops
  - And Ash Wednesday is that day
  - One of these truths that we find today in these ashes is that we are sinners in need of forgiveness
  - We participate in an ancient tradition of putting ashes on our heads to express our sorrow at our sin<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ash\\_Wednesday#Biblical\\_significance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ash_Wednesday#Biblical_significance)

- Our mourning and our penitence for not living up to the divine standard showed to us in the life of Jesus Christ
- The life we covenant to live in our Baptismal Covenant
- And for this, we are all guilty
- Our opening reading this morning from Isaiah describes an ancient, yet familiar scene
- The people ask righteous judgments of God
- They delight to draw near to God, and they cry out, why do you not see our fasts and our humility?
- And Isaiah tells them why God is not found
- They serve their own interest even in their fasts
- They oppress their workers, they fight among themselves
- They put ashes on their heads, even as they act against God's law
- Isaiah goes on to remind them of what God really wants from their fasting: to work to correct injustices and let the oppressed go free
- Share your bread with the hungry and your house with the homeless
- To mend our relationships with our relatives
- Can we not all hear these words speaking directly to us, and reminding us of our failure to live up to God's will
- You know, maybe one of the reasons we come on this Wednesday is to hear some truth
- Sometimes I am guilty of creating this image of myself that over time convinces me I am a pretty good person
- That I give my tithe, help the poor, kindly greet the person in the checkout line next to me
- I don't murder, steal, or physically hurt people
- I try not to be racist, sexist, and to keep my ego and privilege in check
- Without hearing the truth today, I can convince myself I'm doing pretty good, and maybe even that I do not need forgiveness at all...
- But we know that is image we have of ourselves is a false one.
- We know because we hear Jesus over and over again challenge us to something greater.
- We hear Isaiah's words written 2500 years ago, and they still hit close to home. <sup>2</sup>
- Another truth that I think we find in these ashes is in the words said as they are administered

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book\\_of\\_Isaiah#Authorship\\_and\\_historical\\_background\\_3](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Isaiah#Authorship_and_historical_background_3)

- “Remember that you are dust”
- Remember that God created you, formed you, loves you, and wants your life to reflect that
- Just as God formed Adam from the dust of the earth, and formed us in our mother’s womb
- We are a part of God’s creation.
- And if God created us, God owns us.
- No longer can we live simply for ourselves or for our own personal gain ignoring those around us
- We are not our own masters; we have a heavenly one
- Immediately, the idea of being owned by God creates some resistance within me
- We live in a very individualistic society where self-made people are the norm and the standard by which we are measured
- Where personal freedom and choice are of the highest virtues
- But today, we cannot ignore this truth that we are not our own makers
- And God has claim on who we are, and how we live, and the choices we make
- The last truth I have found in these ashes is the second part of the words of administration
  - “And to dust you shall return”
  - I will never forget my first vicar, Gar Demo, from St. Peter’s in Conway
  - His first Eucharist with us was on Ash Wednesday, and he stood up to preach, and I am paraphrasing him here:
    - I don’t know if it’s good or bad, but for my first sermon here with you I have to tell you that you’re all going to die
  - And it is true, that on top of all of the other things we learn and hear to night, we know that we will not live forever
  - Now this has actually found a place in our popular culture
  - But it is turned selfish- it is an excuse to live however you want and do anything you want because life is short
  - But when you combine mortality with the other things we have discussed
  - That God created and owns us, and that we are sinners
  - Knowing you are going to die means that you only have a short time to live out God’s will
  - A short time to grow into the people God wants us to be.

- The clock is ticking, and upon our death we will stand in God's presence accountable
- After receiving these ashes and the truths that they hold
  - That we are created, that we so many times fail to live the way God wants us to live
  - And that our time on this earth is limited
  - The only response a Christian can have in this Holy Lent is one of repentance and amendment of life
  - It is from that place that so many of us chose a fast, to give something up for these 40 days
  - To deny the self as an act of contrition, and through self-sacrifice and denial to allow that to focus our attention back to God
  - For us today in this city, in this country, I think a fast is a very good thing to do.
  - For when are we denied something we desire?
  - I mentioned in my "preachers thought" video that you and I can order anything off of Amazon, and at worst it takes two days
  - At best, SAME. DAY. DELIVERY! I tried it- it works!
  - Immediate, instant gratification to almost anything we want at any time.
  - That, if for no other reason, we should consider denying ourselves a little.
  - Others of us respond in Lent and take on something, a practice that will cause us to be more mindful of God's presence, and perhaps the needs of others
  - Daily prayer, if you do not already
  - Service to the poor, the needy, the downtrodden
  - Isaiah's words echo in our heads: stop speaking evil, help others,
  - Return to the Lord
  - Then shall the Lord respond in abundance- then shall we be repairers of the breach
- I hope you respond to these ashes tonight, and have a Lenten discipline in mind tonight
  - I pray it is something that will turn your heart toward God, give you greater awareness of yourself
  - And perhaps even cultivate gratitude and compassion
  - That is the real purpose of the ashes, of the fasts and disciplines
  - To set our hearts and minds back to the truth

- Do not get the ashes so that others might see, do not give something up so you can tell all of your friends
- Jesus is very clear about that- if you do it for others, then other people's approval or admiration will be your only reward
- Jesus said to not practice your piety before others in order to be seen
- But practicing piety itself, for the right reasons, is what this Holy Lent is all about
- Take a fast, embrace a discipline, because of who God is, and who we really are
- And because we want to be closer to God
- We know that when we turn toward God, God is faithful to respond
- May the truth in these ashes sink in, may it sink deeper than just the skin and find its way into our hearts and minds
  - And may this Lent bring us closer to our God, our creator and redeemer.

Amen.