

ASHES TO ASHES, DUST TO DUST

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 March 1, 2017

Every journey has a beginning. There is always that moment when we leave behind the known and the familiar and start into the new and the unknown. Even if we know the end point—the destination---we aren't always sure what we will encounter along the way, what new experiences and new insights will present themselves. As Christians setting off on the journey to the cross, we can be sure that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. He has gone and goes before us, leading the way. And he travels with us, supporting and encouraging us every step of the way. So, every year on the Wednesday six-and-a-half weeks before Easter Day, the church, the body of Christ, once again sets off on its Lenten journey. While we know that the cross, and ultimately resurrection, are our destination, we do not know what experiences and insights will meet us on our journey.

So this Lenten journey begins for us tonight. Lent is a time of reflection and preparation for Easter. Seems odd doesn't it that we prepare for the most exciting Christian observance by pausing tonight in reflection and quiet ?

So let's look at it another way....Imagine if, in building up to the excitement of a huge NASCAR race, the fans drove 15 miles an hour everywhere they went. In prepping for a wedding, the bride wears black everywhere. A entrepreneur, in coming into a large sum of cash, ceases spending. Christians, in preparing for the greatest miracle...fast, pray, search their hearts? The very joyful event at the end of Lent—that would be Easter! Seems like reason for a 40 day party, not a 40 day funeral. For a lot of people that just wouldn't make sense.

That assessment of Lent is not really fair. Lent isn't a really long funeral.

It is instead a celebration of life as we know it. And to be accurate, Easter is a season of the Christian calendar that last until Pentecost. So yes, you get the huge party afterwards anyway. The traditional statement associated with Ash Wednesday is “Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust” a reminder of the frailty and the mortality we all experience in life. But it is a bit harsh, don’t you think? “Hey, Man, you are dirt,” isn’t exactly uplifting.

But friends, that is precisely the point! Before we can appreciate the new life of Jesus Christ we must place it in stark contrast with what we know. And what do we know? Well, just watch the news, listen to your neighbors, or check your bank account. We know scarcity. We know fear. We know dashed hopes and brokenness. We know ashes.

But before we go patting ourselves on the back for being so realistic or being so caught up in our suffering that we get prideful, hear these words from Matthew 6: 6:1-6, 16-21.....The reading for today should make us all wonder if we’ve missed the mark in our faithfulness. Even as we confront the difficulties Christ faced and our own shortcomings, we keep our journey between God and ourselves. The true reward waiting at the end of Lent is not that our piety will be rewarded but that our ashes are precisely the material God will use to bring new life. This season will help us look at our ashes in a whole new way. Over this season we remember the ashes that are the beginning for so many of our stories about sharing the joy of Christ, and we will come to a new understanding of what Christ can do with our ashes.

Prayer: Oh, God, help me to practice piety before you. On this Ash Wednesday may I be honest about where I am in life with you and the people around me. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Amen.