



SUNDAY SERMON

Wake-up call

Episcopalians aren't known for being very showy about their faith. Oh, we might wear a small cross on a tasteful chain, modestly tucked beneath our shirt. Some of might have the Episcopal shield on our car, but I doubt many non-Episcopalians know what that means—Rotary International? Daughters of the American Revolution?

This reticence about showing off our faith makes Ash Wednesday a particularly difficult day for us. All of us will leave here this morning with a big black cross on our foreheads. There's an irony in this: after all, we just heard Jesus say, in the reading from Matthew's Gospel, "don't look dismal when you fast, wash your face, don't practice your piety in order to be seen by others." Maybe wearing an ashy cross on your forehead wouldn't have been so unusual in the late middle ages, but doing so in the America we live in today makes you fairly conspicuous. "Hey, look at me! I'm Christian! I just went to church, and I'm really holy!"

So why do we do it? What are these ashes for?

Listen to the words of the prophet Joel: "Blow the trumpet in Zion—Sound the alarm—the day of the Lord is coming!" Wake up! Wake up!

Ash Wednesday is a wake-up call, a phone call in the middle of the night, and like all midnight phone calls, the voice on the other end of the line has news we probably don't want to hear, hard news and hard words. Sin. Death. Judgment.

Sin is another thing we Episcopalians don't like to dwell on too much, and I think for good reason—it's something some Christians seem to be morbidly obsessed with. Yet here again, on this one day every year, it's something the church reminds us of: we are all sinners. The church goes so far as to literally rub it in our face: ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

These ashes are every time I was unkind or cruel, every lie I told to myself or to others, every time I forgot to be thankful for all of God's good gifts. Lord have mercy.

They aren't just my ashes or your ashes either. We bear them for others: for this city, this country, for the whole world.

These ashes are what remain after setting a match to our highest ideals—the bill of rights, the Geneva Convention, the Civil Rights Act. Lord have mercy.

These ashes are the money we have burned fighting wars that didn't need to be fought, while the poor on the streets of this country, and across the globe, starved. Lord have mercy.

This dust is blown to us from around the world: it's the detritus left behind from the Women's March. It's the dirt clinging to the shoes of refugees. It's thick black smoke from fossil fuels that make us all rich and poor at once. Lord have mercy.

Continued

DATE

Ash Wednesday
Wednesday, Feb. 14, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

Ash Wednesday is a wake-up call, a shock to the system. But now we are up. We are awake. We have heard the truth, and we have a choice. Do we get ready to face the day, or do we go back to sleep? Do we go on as before? Or do we turn again, to seek God's presence?

The prophet Joel says it better than I can:

"Even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

There's another message in these ashes, than just Sin and Death. The message is hard for us to see, standing here— on St. Valentine's day no less! — in the dark valley between the promise of Christmas behind us and the possibility of Easter ahead. These ashes also mean Life and Hope — and yes, even Love.

When you go home tonight, before you go to bed, as you stand over the bathroom sink, look at yourself in the mirror. Look at your forehead. These ashes are a cross. The vertical line connects us to God, reminds us of our absolute dependence upon God in all things. We like to think we are in control, that we can do this on our own—well, we aren't and we can't. Stop trying to be in control, to do everything, to be good, and allow God to work in you.

And the horizontal line—the horizontal line of the cross describes God's embrace of the whole world, the absolute equality of all created beings. Good or bad, ugly or beautiful, God's love reaches out to grasp each and every one of us.

Open your hearts to God, and he will fill them with love—the strength we need for the journey ahead. Because Ash Wednesday is not a day in isolation. It is the beginning of a journey called Lent—or better yet, a journey called life. We are likely to get even dirtier on the road ahead. But we shouldn't let that stop us. There will be hard days too: the map we're following allows for no shortcut around Good Friday. But in the distance there is a promised land, a place where God's abundant steadfast love will cover us all, a day when sorrow and death and darkness and war will be no more.

This is the journey God invites us to begin today. And God will be walking with us on this road, binding up our wounds, wiping away our tears, and leading us, finally, to a new world, transformed and redeemed by love. And love will be the only thing that matters.

AMEN.