



ASH WEDNESDAY SERMON

What Now?

There is one thing in this service that we never do at any other time of the year. The Imposition of Ashes, it is called. It is both strange and obvious. When I was a Presbyterian child, I thought it was strange. I wondered at the several students in my class who would come in with black splotches on their foreheads or at other people I might see around our suburban town on a certain early spring day. My parents said it was just something Roman Catholics did, but we didn't, kind of like kneeling in church or having communion every week. My parents obviously didn't know about Episcopalians.

But now for me, along with kneeling in church - at least occasionally, and taking communion every week, these ashes have meaning, and it is an obvious one, and this Wednesday is an important day. These ashes bring home the reality of life in a way that almost nothing else does. "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." We are stuff of the earth, inspired and given breath for a time, and then we die. We all do. The tiny children who come with small perfect faces tilted up, as yet unscathed by the world, the busy harried faces of those stopping by for this quick ritual, and the creased and worn faces of our elders, perhaps wondering if this will be their last time. It is moving to me to see and touch these faces with a smudge of ash; it is moving to me to feel the mark and carry it with me into the day. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

But the point of this ritual is not just to remind us of our mortality. In doing that, it can nudge us to value the limited time we have in this life all the more, to focus on what really counts. But along with that, it seems to me that this mark poses a question, and that question is "What Now?" What does this life, all the more precious because it will end, hold now, hold next - what now?

This is the question the noted author Ann Patchett posed in a remarkable graduation speech she gave several years ago at Sarah Lawrence College - a speech that she later expanded into a small book called "What Now?" She was speaking specifically about the transition that graduates make into post-college life - to jobs and families, perhaps marriage and parenthood. A transition full of uncertainty, wild hopes and ideals, fear and anxiety. But we all face transitions as we move from one season of life into another. Each season has its own joys and sorrows; each season poses the question "What Now?"

continued

St. Columba's
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

St. Columba's is a welcoming Christian community that seeks to be open in spirit, deep in faith, rich in worship, active in service.

4201 Albemarle Street NW ■ Washington, DC 20016 ■ 202-363-4119 ■ Columba.org

And so Ash Wednesday and Lent can afford us a rich opportunity for thinking about the transitions of our lives, for asking the questions about what comes next. We move from Lent to Easter, from darkness and somberness, awareness of our brokenness and mortality into a celebration of new life out of death, new possibilities for hope and joy. No matter your age, no matter how long the future seems to stretch, we can, on this day, ask what is next - what are we up to? what are we up against? What now?

And Patchett has this to say about "What Now?"

"What now is not just a panic-stricken question tossed out into a dark unknown. What now can also be our joy. It is a declaration of possibility, of promise, of chance. It acknowledges that our future is open, that we may well do more than anyone expected of us, that at every point in our development we are still striving to grow. There's a time in our lives when we crave all the answers. It seems terrifying not to know what's coming next. But there is another time, a better time when we see our lives as a series of choices, and What Now? represents our excitement and our future, the very vitality of life. It's up to you to choose a life that will keep expanding. It takes discipline to remain curious; it takes work to be open to the world - but oh my friends, what glorious work it is."

Our work, at every stage of life, is the transition from what our lives are, to what they might be. Sometimes the gap is great and yawning; other times it is small, but we never get there completely. We never craft the perfect life. And we don't have to - that is not the goal; rather the goal is to live fully, love generously, meet hardship and suffering with courage, forgive and be forgiven. And then, yes, one day, soon or many many years off, we will die and revert to the dust from which we are made.

Ultimately, our times are in God's hands - we are given our lives, and we are loved throughout our days. Jesus' life and death tell us that story - of a life given, a call followed, love poured out and death not the end. God's love made manifest in Jesus, as it can be in us.

These ashes are a precious reminder that our days are a gift and that our end, whenever it comes, is usually not bad luck or a dirty trick but the natural conclusion of the life here on earth that God has given each of us. In dust and ashes we begin Lent, and "What now?" may be a good question to carry with us into these forty days as we strive anew to live faithfully in response to God's amazing love. Amen.