

Ash Wednesday

Bulletin

'Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.'

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A man makes His way through the waste places of Judea and Samaria. There, He heals sicknesses and casts out demons. Yet it is not the wilderness He seeks to cleanse. *Like a flint his face is set toward Jerusalem*, to purge away the harlotry infecting the sacred mount of the holy Temple, and to exorcize the *city that kills the prophets*.

The Lord makes His way into His Father's house. Yet it is not a *dwelling made with hands* in which the Christ seeks to establish His throne. For the heart of man is His true temple, which He formed in the beginning to be His resting place in which to *lay his head*, and His court in which to *judge the nations*.

Yet out of a man's heart comes *evil imaginations, adulteries, fornications, murder, theft, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, gossip, blasphemy, pride, foolishness; for in sin did our mother conceive us*, even as being deceived, she lusted for what ought not be sought, took what would surely kill, betrayed Him who would keep her, and spoke wickedness of him who was given to her; that she might *be like God, knowing good and evil*; and evil she knew, becoming blind to her Lord, and seeing nakedness in herself.

All these come out from a man, and defile him.

A man makes his way through the waste places of this sinful world, and *like a flint*, He draws near to your soul; but *when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith upon the earth? While the Lord is near, will he find that alone which he desires, a broken and contrite heart?*

There is none without sin, no, not one. And to we who breed and multiply sin daily in the whoredom of our imaginings, *how shall we rightly greet the Lord?*

*'Blow the trumpet in Zion;
consecrate a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
gather the people.
Consecrate the congregation;
assemble the elders;
gather the children,
even nursing infants.'*

*'Return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
and rend your hearts and not your garments.'*

'Repent' demands the prophet. *'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'*
The Lord comes forth to seize His crown.

During this Holy Season of Lent, we confess our sinfulness, and in prayer and fasting commend ourselves to the mercy of God. *Who knows if he will turn and leave a blessing behind? For our festivals and appointed feasts his soul hates.* But perhaps He even now *loves a woman who loves another man*, even you, dear Christian soul.

For this reason, the Church institutes this day, that we might begin the breaking of our hearts, and give hope to our contrition; that we might bear ash upon our foreheads, even ash in the shape of a cross, knowing the suffering which our Lord must endure, that our hope might be fulfilled.

It is entirely seemly that the Christian be imprinted with ashes, even as our fathers Job and Abraham did before us, and the pagans of Nineveh hearing the preaching of Jonah. For we, too, have done great evil in the sight of the Lord.

It may seem odd to mark our faces with ash as we do this day; it is a practice without a doubt ancient, and by any measure even primitive. Yet this we do, as our fathers did, and for a reason.

For to repent means simply to turn back, to go back from the way we have trod, away from this deviant course, and back to the way of the Lord, where *his word is a light to our feet and a lamp to our path.*

Yet how far back shall we go? To what point shall we turn? To our last sin? That is but a moment ago. To our last great sin? Our last scandalous shame? But even to go back that far leaves a life of folly before it. To the innocence of childhood? But children are not innocent, for again it is written, *'I was brought forth in iniquity.'*

To what, then shall we return? The Patriarchs knew the answer well, and even thought it obvious; *dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return;* for this is not only a prediction, but a command; for only when we were naught, were we not yet sinners.

I am but dust and ashes, says Abraham. And naked surrounded by Ash did Holy Job seek his answer. For we do not seek to repent, to return, to an earlier day in our life, when we were not so bad, not so angry, not so adulterous, not so prideful, not so unkind, not so unforgiving, for no such day exists. We must return to earth from whence we came, where *innocent blood cries from the ground.*

To bear ashes upon one's body is to confess that it was only when we were but dust and ash that we were innocent; that is, that we were never without sin, save when God first imagined in His inner council to *make man in our image, after our likeness.*

This is the only symbol of repentance fitting to the sinner, not to repent of this or that fault or mistake, but to repent of a life full of fault, and a birth that was a mistake.

It is to return to the earth, time and again, while alive; before we must return to the earth, for one last time in the grave; our last confession of sin; our obedience to the command to *surely die.* The ashes upon your forehead speak these things.

Interestingly, they are made from the palm branches displayed the previous year on Palm Sunday; the very ones that hung in this sanctuary and were gripped in your children's hands.

The palm tree, unlike others, grows in desert places, in the sand and dust of the wasteland; yet with a little water it grows tall, and green. It is a sign of life that has sprung out of death; of joy flowing forth from despair. For this reason the Jews greeted the Messiah with palm branches strewn before Him as He entered the Holy City, for in the midst of their ceaseless oppressions, a savior had come.

But if they are a sign of joy, why then do we burn them to ash to be made a sign of penance and fasting and death?

Even as palms were strewn before the Christ, yet he treaded over them, stamping them into the dirt; for to gain *the joy that is set before him*, He must *endure the shame of the cross*; and only thereby *count his suffering as joy*.

So even as the rejoicing crowd that day would soon call for His death; these palm branches made ash call for ours, if only we would hear their silent words, and so follow our Lord, even to the cross, *that we might die a death like his; that our joy might be made full*.

A man makes His way through the waste places of this world; for your soul He sets His face like a flint, to purge away the harlotry infecting our hearts, and to exorcise the desert places of our being with *living water*.

Let us therefore greet the Lord rightly, for *a broken and contrite heart he will not despise*.

Therefore: call together a solemn assembly, consecrate a fast. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

'Make straight his paths.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields