

SERMON – ASH WEDNESDAY – 09 MARCH 2011  
St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

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Joel 2: 12-19

Matt. 6: 16-21

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

It is not hard to imagine a conversation that goes like this. You are walking down the hallway or in an aisle at the grocery and someone says, "What's that smudge? Did you know you have dirt on your head?" You mumble something about the beginning of Lent and that it is Ash Wednesday and the response is "Oh, Yeeeah—how dreary and medieval"!! For far too many the idea of a season given over to self-reflection, renewal, and repentance simply smacks of outdated, outmoded and moldy causes better left in some far off time and place. After all, the cultural priests of our day urge us on to feel good about ourselves, to practice good "positive thinking", and to believe that God's highest desire for us is lots of success. As someone commented when invited to such a worship, "I would rather not feel bad about myself; I figure what I don't know won't hurt me!" But of course, that is just part of the problem; the mistaken understanding of today. This Day is not intended to be about oppressive guilt or self-loathing, but about honesty before God and receiving the gift of his mercy.

So, what do you make of this ritual for dispensing Ashes? How does it strike you for the priest to say, "Remember, you are dust, and to dust you shall return"? At an intellectual level each of us knows full well the truth of such a statement. We are all mortal. But perhaps the meaning of this from a faith perspective is deeper than the obvious. These actions which we have shared are a serious reminder that should not be deceived about ourselves, and the things that motivate and even at times, own our deepest attention and desires. Like peering into a mirror which reflects back only the image it receives, Ash Wednesday sends an ancient echo which for centuries Christians have heard—Remember who you are. See if you truly rely on the God who is infinitely merciful or if self-centeredness has led you to believe that you are the author of your own life and hope. Realizing the truth about ourselves, while disquieting and even frightening, is the first step in the process of confession. It is the beginning of being healed because we come to see that we are not where we want or need to be. We come to find that we have, like the Prodigal Son, missed the gifts that the Father is ready to give—love, acceptance, and a place at the banquet of life. REMEMBER-- We are told in this season to repentance. It is an oft misunderstood word. It does not mean to sit around in self-pitying sorrow, but literally to get a new mind, or to awaken to what is real and lasting. We are asked to remember what relationship really brings us wholeness so that we do not have to act or pretend, as if that would suffice.

This call to remember has another side. Not only does it ask us to not be deceived, but it also tells us not to despair about who we are—it reminds us at the end of the journey is hope—The end of Lent is Easter, where we see what God has for His people. We are reminded that our mortality is linked to the death of Jesus, who death destroys what threatens us. We walk

during Lent with a partner, with a fellow journeyer who already sees what we can be and whose we are, and in that is our confidence.

In Snowmass, Colorado there is a Trappist Monastery, Our Lady of the Snows. In the chapel, behind the altar, and to the side of a stained glass window there hangs a simple wooden cross. It stays there until it is taken down to mark the grave of the next monk who dies. Until then it hangs on the wall and each time they face the altar during communion, they see this symbol of their death. It is as if their Rule is saying, "keep your mortality before you eyes, and at the very same time it is saying look forward to holy Easter and your own resurrection, which is the promise and gift of God which puts this life in perspective. REMEMBER. Do not despair for God is unshakably—FOR US. REMEMBER.

Amen+