

Ash Wednesday
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St. Paul's, Nbpt, MA

Do you remember the palms you held in your hands last Palm Sunday? They were fresh, green and smelled like a tropical climate. With those palms in our hands we raised our voices to join in the refrain that has rung out in every age since the first Palm Sunday – *Hossana, blessed is the one that comes in the name of the Lord!* But as that drama of Palm Sunday and Holy Week continued to unfold and the cross began to loom, those palms of praise fell by the wayside and we found ourselves in the story with the crowd who stood imprisoned by fear and sin as innocence was crucified.

This past Sunday I gathered with a small group of children and adults in the front door vestibule to burn the palms of last Palm Sunday to make the ashes we will later wear on our foreheads. Those palms were dry and brittle and burned easily. The ash that remains after their burning symbolizes the withering of human acclaim of Jesus in the face of the events that led to the Cross.

Soon we will hear the familiar words as those ashes are placed on our foreheads once again with the words, *“remember that you are but dust and to dust you shall return.”* They remind us that we cannot save ourselves. Even

the best we can do – our praises of God, are not perfect, nor imperishable – they wither, just as these bodies wither. All becomes dust again. All become dust, except that which animates us – the breath of God. God’s power working in the world and residing in us is the only imperishable commodity!

In our lesson from Joel, God tells the prophet to blow the trumpet in Zion. This is a reference to the priestly tradition of blowing a ram’s horn to call the people to repentance. That alarm would have been loud and startling. It would have grabbed people’s attention away from whatever they were doing to turn their heads in the direction of the temple.

Repentance was something initiated by the power of God through his priests. The people’s part was to turn and respond. To seek out God in the temple and to confess all that separated them from God, all the sinful baggage that had accumulated so that they might live more fully in his presence. This was not just for their benefit, but for the benefit of the whole nation, and indeed the whole world. Because then God would be made manifest through them wherever they were and whatever they were doing. And never again would anyone be able to ask, *‘Where is their God?’* because it would be clear that God was alive and active among them.

Our call to repentance this Ash Wednesday is the same – it comes from God to us, not just for our benefit, but for the benefit of the whole world. That is why in our Gospel lesson Jesus stresses to us how important it is that we observe it, not just for show but for real. The reward of true repentance is not feeling satisfied by our accomplishments or by other's praise of us. Rather it is closer connection with God. It is heaven here and now, as our lives become more imbued with God's presence. That is the reward Jesus is preaching about!

When we answer the call and enter into a holy Lent, we allow God to dwell more fully in us, to transform us with his light – to be a beacon of that light for others. When we allow ourselves to be swept up by God this way, the outward circumstances of our lives become less important. As the writer of the Second Letter to the Corinthians says, when we are being reconciled to God – cooperating with grace to live more and more into God's likeness – we can withstand anything: *“great afflictions , hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger.”* And we can respond with: *“purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God.”*

I have a long way to go with living into that second list – how about you? But that is the beauty of Ash Wednesday and Lent coming each year. Each year if we can turn and release more of the baggage we carry – and that does seem to get easier with practice – then God’s image, which lies at the heart of every human being, will shine out a bit brighter. And when we do this surrendering, repentance work together, as a body, the light becomes dazzling. Then no one asks, “*Where is their God?*” for God can be seen active and alive among us – among us, who are merely dust, animated with divine glory.

In Christ’s name. Amen+