

Giving Thanks for ALL of Life
A sermon preached in Manor Road United Church
Ash Wednesday
February 17, 2010
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Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday is traditionally a fast day in the church calendar and this is probably why we read Jesus' instructions around fasting. It's an interesting choice because it seems to show that the church is getting it all wrong. Jesus tells us that we should fast in secret, that no one should know about it except us and God. "Put oil on your head and wash your face", he tells us, and the church marks our face with ashes so everyone will know that we have been faithful. When the ashes are imposed it is traditional for the priest to recite Genesis 3:19: "Remember, O man, that you are dust and to dust you shall return" – which is what God said to Adam and Eve after they had disobeyed God and eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. On Ash Wednesday we are reminded of our mortality.

In ancient times no one needed to be reminded of the shortness and uncertainty of life. But in our day we have a different view of things. Medical science has made our lives longer and more secure. Death eventually comes to everyone of course, but unless the person is very old, death is now thought of as a tragedy or a failure of the medical system. Unlike our ancestors we feel uncomfortable around death; we don't want to talk about it and we certainly don't want a priest reminding us of our mortality. So Ash Wednesday is not a popular service in our time. We love to go to Vespers on Christmas Eve – the darkness is sweet, the candlelight is intoxicating. We celebrate birth, new life and new light coming into the world, light that the darkness cannot overpower, light that is everlasting. On Ash Wednesday, the darkness is threatening. We recognize that we will die, we repent of our sins, we see the light of our lives as fading and temporary: "Remember, O man, that you are dust and to dust you shall return".

Christmas Eve and Ash Wednesday; Birth and death. Common to all living things. Yet, we treat them so differently. Birth is a time of joy and celebration, hope for the future. Like Christmas. And death is a time of great sadness and mourning. Like Ash Wednesday. Or Good Friday. No wonder we don't want to be reminded of it. We don't like to talk about it; we don't like to admit that it will happen to us and to those we love. Yet the church has always tried to lift up both birth and death as equally important bookends to our lives. Sooner or later, everyone will need to touch all the bases in our life's journey. No exceptions.

So there is wisdom in being here this night; feeling the ashes on your forehead; quietly contemplating what they mean. Life is so precious. It should never be taken for granted. We didn't have to be born at all. Look at the night sky. Millions of light years all around us. And as far as we know there is no life out there at all; only here on this single planet. What a gift! Just to be alive. Just to be able to look at the sky. But our precious life is also finite; inevitably it is soon over, and we return to the dust of the earth. When we realize this in our hearts then we will never take this gift for granted again. We will live each day with increased wakefulness. Even our fast days are days of celebration. We have no reason to be dismal. We will marvel at the extravagance of blessings all around us with every breath we take. We are not alone. In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. God, the good and loving presence behind all the miracles that we experience in this precious life. Thanks be to God.

Amen