

Ash for the Future
Ash Wednesday
February 26, 2020
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucas Levy Keppel

[Joel 2:1-2,12-16](#)

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

If I asked you when the practice of imposing ashes began – when people first started drawing a cross on the forehead or hand – what would you say?

It turns out, it's not an ancient tradition, despite its antiquity. It's only been around for 7 or 8 centuries, from the time of the great bubonic plagues. The Western church was terrified of the mortality, of the apparent randomness of the suffering around them. To them, the ashes weren't meant to remind the congregation of their mortality – the sickness and death were all around, after all. Instead, the practice of mixing ash with oil and water was meant to connect people with their future – reminding them that even in the midst of great turmoil, suffering, and fear, we have been marked and claimed by God. The ashes formed a reminder that returning to God in penitence marked you not for death, but for eternal life.

And so, the prophet Joel reminds us, that God doesn't want us to make an outward show of penitence without changing our actions – as elegantly stated in the passage we read today, “tear your hearts – not your clothes.” One of the reasons that this service for Ash Wednesday is at night, rather than in the morning, is to encourage the wearing of ashes as a personal reminder of repentance rather than as a public display, a false humility. And repentance is about turning around, changing yourself for the better.

The ashes we use are taken from the burning of palm branches, connecting the whole liturgical year together – reminding us that last year's celebration is the starting point for this year's repentance, growth, and change. We all have things that we have done that we shouldn't have – so, let's make it right. Go and seek out the people you have wronged, settle what debts you can, and return to living in

God's Way. Not out of fear, but out of a response to the grace of God, who loves us and forgives us.

For the ashes that mark our change also form the soil in which we are planted. Just like new growth, springing up from the ground after a wildfire, we too grow through the remnants of who we were. And yes, we'll wave palms again – and we'll repent again and again – but through it all, God cares for us. As Paul reminds the church in II Corinthians, "For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ. As God's partners, we beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it."

Don't stay as you are – but reach out, growing and changing, and living in God's light. Let tonight be a moment of rebirth, of reenergizing, of revitalizing. Just as the church reforms and changes to grow more fully in God's way, so should each of us as members of it. Let the ashes of today be the ash for the future.

I'd like to close this evening with a poem from the Rev. Rex A. E. Hunt, out of Australia:

*Ash Wednesday invites us to come back to earth.
To wonder at the gift of life, my life our life
with the earth, the shared body of our existence.*

*These ashes were once trees and shrubs
and places where life was lived to its fullest.
Once they were full of life
Now they are black and grey. Dry. Lifeless.*

*But mixed with the oil and water of our baptism
they make good fertilizer:
It will help the seeds of the gospel take deeper root in us
and bring forth the fruits, the harvest of justice, peace, and
generosity.*

*These are ashes worth wearing. May we accept this gift. And be
blessed. And be assured we will be different at the end of this season.
For from the burnt ashes will spring the green shoot of life
and the purple flower of attentiveness to God. Amen.*