

## **Sermon Preached on March 2, 2022 – Ash Wednesday**

By The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Yarmouth, ME 04096

Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

### **Ash Wednesday**

My mother's voice is ever in my mind on Ash Wednesday: "why do we put ashes on our head on Ash Wednesday? Doesn't the scripture for that day even say 'don't flaunt your fasting and spirituality?' How can we hear that command in scripture and then a few minutes later go get ashes marked on our heads?"

It is puzzling – when you hear Jesus say in Matthew's scripture for this evening "don't be boastful when you pray, don't look sullen when you fast, don't blare a trumpet every time you do a good thing" but rather "pray, give alms, fast in secret, and your God who sees in secret will reward you" and then we do this very visible act

Why *do* we put ashes on our head producing this very public image of our faith?

Is it boastful? Is it to claim some sort of status of "Extra Great Christian" or "Most Devout"?

That doesn't seem to align with our scripture readings this evening and it doesn't align with the other acts and symbols of our faith and our liturgy

Our rituals and our worship are filled with opportunities for us, followers of Christ, to experience the great mystery of faith and wonder of God through the most simple and basic elements: bread, wine, candle wax, fire, water, and tonight ash

Bread and wine – the body and blood of Christ

Water – the element of welcome and liberation at our baptisms

Candle wax and fire – the Holy Spirit illuminating our path

Ash – dust, soil, humus the very stuff of stars, earth, and human beings – God's great creation

Perhaps marking our heads with ash is not so much meant to be an act that broadcasts something to other people as much as it is meant to, quite literally, ground us

Like the other elements in worship – bread and wine, water, wax and fire – the ash is a means of connecting us with the Divine, a holy awareness and a holy channel of God's presence

Today marks the first day in Lent, a forty day journey of prayer and penitence, reflection and wonder, listening and watching

A season of taking extra steps to quiet the noise that normally surrounds us by reducing our existence, even for just a moment, to dust

We are dust, and to dust we shall return

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The ash that is placed upon our foreheads is marked in the shape of a cross, because as we are grounded in this most basic, organic place of our existence, God is with us, God is stirring in us

Tonight, we come forward and mark ourselves with ash to allow ourselves a moment, ever so brief in the scheme of our life, that settles our hearts, quiets the noise, and connects us to that which we are - holy dust

Because life otherwise is not so quiet

The complexities of life, the temptations of power and privilege, the distractions of to-do lists and agendas pull us further and further from our core as God's holy and enlivened dust

Life is sports games and practices, music lessons and rehearsals, meetings and committees, Netflix and Hulu, grocery shopping and bills, jobs and walking the dog

Life is war in Ukraine and tyrants wielding their unrestrained might, Indigenous communities pleading for acknowledgment, trans and nonbinary children and their families living in fear in Texas

Life is out of control, or it feels in control because we are able to distance ourselves from the chaos with the protective barriers of distance, distraction, and privilege

Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return

If you're comfortable, I invite you to close your eyes

You are dust, and to dust you shall return

For a brief moment, you are dust – you and God are connected in this brief moment at the most basic level of existence, you are grounded

What do you perceive? How is God stirring in your heart? Do you feel the love that engulfs you? Do you sense the compassion that holds you? Do you hear God saying "it's alright! I'm here. I am with you"?

You are dust, and to dust you shall return.

You may open your eyes

Amen.