

Ash Wednesday

The Rev. Andrew Rampton

Today is a day of hard spiritual work. It is good, holy, healthy spiritual work, but it's hard. And perhaps not always presented well. It would not be especially difficult to get the impression that today is about coming to church to feel wretched and miserable about yourself, to believe that God has impossible standards which we forever fall short of, and to fall into a sort of spiritual hopelessness about ever "living up".

We begin the season of Lent with this day because Lent is about preparation and growth, about new beginnings, reflection on what we are carrying with us in this life—what we need more of and what it may be time to put down. Today is, in part, about realizing and reckoning with how we are made, our vulnerability to sin, and putting aside those things that we do not need to take with us on our journey toward Easter. We take a look in the mirror, we confess those things that we have done which we know were not of God, and we seek reconciliation in God's forgiveness and the sharing of God's feast at the altar.

A little while ago, a friend of mine and I were discussing the idea of "rising" in relation to Easter and the Resurrection. This is, of course, the great celebration on which we have our hearts fixed throughout Lent. We realized, in the course of our discussion, that the promising of rising to new life isn't much of a promise if we believe that we're already at the top. It's an easy thing to do, especially for so many people in the West who are stunningly healthy and wealthy compared to so much of the world. If we believe that we are so powerful, have such privilege, that we can move through the world without reference to the rest of Creation, to one another, even without reference to Death, then the promise of rising is a meaningless one. The promise of Resurrection holds no value. God's selfless gift of love isn't something we can buy or sell and it can't raise us any higher, so it goes ignored.

Today, Ash Wednesday, is a day we set aside to remind ourselves—prince and pauper alike—that we are not at the top. That we have, indeed, fallen short of the glory of God and that we have miles to go on the path toward being like Christ and that it is a road we cannot walk by ourselves. Only with one another and with God's help—the cloud of smoke by day and pillar of fire by night—can we make this journey.

We remember today that we are made from dust and, one day, these bodies will return to dust. Our mortality is an important point of reckoning, for it is one of our most profound points of encounter with God. With God's help, we pass through death into eternal life. With God's help, a frightening and difficult transition is made a thing of beauty.

But being made of dust is not only about our mortality. It is also about our relationship. When God made the earth, it was made from nothing. God spoke and there was earth, which separated the waters. God made sun, moon, stars, and most else in Creation by speaking it into existence. When the time came that God desired to make humanity, God fashioned us first from dust and clay that we might bear the image and likeness of God's own self and then breathed life into us. God's desire was that we would have such a deeply interwoven relationship with creation that we were made not from nothing, but out of the stuff of Creation itself. You and I have our very being in the Creation around us, for we were made from it and will one day return to it. Our relationships, when we are holy and selfless and when we are sinful and selfish, carry such power in this existence because we are made by God from the very land on which we walk and which gives us our food.

So today we begin Lent with a day of examining those relationships: with ourselves, with one another and with God. We commit to the Lenten journey of preparation and growth with this time of confession, reconciliation, renewal, and a step up, with God's help, toward Resurrection.