

SERMON FOR YEAR C, ASH WEDNESDAY
JOEL 2:1-2,12-17; MATTHEW 6:1-6,16-21
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"RAIN"

A few days ago, I issued a challenge for us all to more deeply consider
What it is that keeps us *in a place of intimacy* with God, or what gets us there.
Today I want us to consider the reverse:
What it is that keeps us *from* intimacy with God.

I said last Sunday that intimacy is the lived desire to both know and *be* known –
For the purposes of mutuality and continuous, deepening evolution in a relationship.
That may not be the very definition of "intimacy" according to Webster or Hoyle,
But it's surely the point: to know God in Christ, and be known.
Remember, "You can't get close enough to someone you love."
And God is using everything possible to get our attention, to get close to us,
So that we might only see how very much we are loved already,
And how much God desires for us to respond to that love –
Not with intellectual declarations,
Not with our church-going,
Not with the religious obsession with being right in our doctrine ...
But in opening our hearts, in loving God back, in knowing God "back" –
Practicing not a religious system, but a relationship.

It sounds so simple, doesn't it?
I really think it can be.

Today something amazing begins. Lent begins.
A thousand years ago, Ash Wednesday arose
Because individual penitence in Rome fell out of popularity,
And in some genius move, the church managed to recapture it
For use by the whole congregation.
The cruciform ash mark on the forehead symbolized one's participation
In a season of fasting and penitence prior to Easter, and it still does.

Somehow, in a millennium, we never lost it;
And today we say, It's as much about the chance to love God back, to know God back,
To open our hearts to God without defense or pretention ...
As it is a chance to weep over whatever holds us from that glorious vision.
It's as much a chance to stop and be transformed
As it is to hear the words of a beautiful promise that sounds more like a threat:
We are mortal, we are finite, *We are dust and to dust we shall return.*
Pulvis es, the old Catholic rite went, *in pulverem reverteris.*

See, it falls on the ear like a dirge or a menace – the spectacle and specter of death.
But those ashes have a positive value,
Though we might have to twist our minds round a bit to see that.

In some Christian traditions, just for instance,
We see ash used in the dedication of new worship spaces.
Even better: the priests of the Muisca nation, in pre-colonial Colombia,
Used to sprinkle ashes on their mountain-tops as part of their rain-making ceremonies.
Can you imagine?
Ashes – the preeminent symbol of dryness and death – employed to make rain.

So today these ashes will come onto our bodies,
Be smeared onto the most visible and public part of us (the tops of our mountains?),
And a question will be smudged onto our heads:
*To know God; to love God; to open your heart ... What keeps you from that?
What's holding back the rain?*

Very likely the answer is completely self-evident;
You knew the answer to an unasked question before the sermon started.
You had your answer, and I had mine.
We don't have to go rooting around;
I don't need to make a list, and if I did, we might be tempted to change answers
To something more defensible or palatable.
The simple fact is that the naming of the sin of what we do or do not do
Should not be watered down – not today.
We have to see it, name it, own it, lament it, confess it,
Nail it to the cross that lingers six weeks down the road;
Tear our clothes over it; cry ourselves to sleep because of it.

All true.
And yet we will sing a song on Sunday that contains the line:
“To rend the soul, such grief is not Lent's goal.”

Dear friends, we have to be honest about how we're living and how it is or isn't working;
How it is or isn't serving the purpose of intimacy with God through Christ Jesus.
We have been set this singular task:
To take the small number of ashes on our foreheads and to somehow sink into their depths
And find that place where penitence turns into peace, and peace into dancing
Because we find, surprise of surprises, that forgiveness is already a fact.
Now, it's a danger, it's a thin line for a Christian to walk:
Between pointless wallowing and cheap grace.
Nevertheless, it's the line the faithful are all called to toe when it comes to this season.
So *give up* what doesn't serve the purpose of intimacy with God this Lent –
Whatever blocks your heart;
And *add* what does serve the purpose of intimacy with God.
Don't do what doesn't help. Do what does. Do bother with all the specifics.

But mostly, just let those ashes go to work;
Let God's great restoration project get a purchase in you,
And turn you – the true meaning of *repent* – turn you,
In the direction you need to face;
So that walking out of the grave with Christ on Easter,
We might know why we ever had to go into it today.

Last night, we couldn't get the palms to burn with great ease.
We went out into the chill where it was dark and the prayer sheets were hard to see.

A committee, a gaggle of us, prayed over the palms and worked to get the initial burn going,
And then a subcommittee stayed on,
And before I knew it,
I was down on my knees, earning my salt as a priest,
Blowing the cinders around and choking down smoke, marinating in smoke.

At last, we brought the ashes inside.
(I'm sure I smelled like I'd just been out camping for a week.)
And I thought, as I toted this little metal canister around,
Of the ancient priests of the Temple – expert butchers –
Who clocked out of their shifts and went home covered in the blood of sacrifice.

Then I went home and put my clothes in the washer and showered
And blew my nose and wiped my eyes
And the soot was endless.
I thought I was in a Charles Dickens novel.
And then I turned on the television and watched a show
About a person who was able to turn into a column of smoke whenever he wanted.

These symbols weren't lost on me; they just kept stacking up.

Ash on the mountain-top. A rain's coming.
We stand helpless before God in Lent, come to the pinnacle because we long to see Jesus,
And we're covered head to toe in the ashen, gray powder of our repentance.
Remain here with me.
There are clouds gathering on the furthest horizon,
And a rain beating in them to slake the thirstiest soul.

Amen; may it be so.