

## ASH WEDNESDAY, YEAR A, FEBRUARY 22, 2023

There was once a five-year-old girl who, after she was baptized, asked, "Can you still see the cross on my forehead?" It's a great question that says everything about what it means to live a Christian life. For it is this cross, traced with oil on our foreheads at our baptism, which connects us to God. Today we retrace our Baptismal crosses with ashes that remind us that we are mortal people and that the universe began and evolved out of that first, holy dust trillions of years ago. The intimate nearness of our creative God is made visible in these ashes we receive today.

Ash Wednesday is also when we are forced to see the truth about ourselves which is that we are made from the dust of the earth. Our mortality stares us in the face. Sometimes that kind of honesty is hard to grasp especially in our world that is filled with gadgets and gimmicks that makes us forget our true living nature. We spend millions of dollars trying to forget that we are mortal people. We have creams to hide wrinkles, dyes to hide gray hair and plastic surgeons to help hide the passing of years. Our world is obsessed with youth and declares that youth is infinitely valuable. What is infinitely valuable is living life well and the truth about the secret to living well is facing our mortality and coming to terms with the source of our life which is God

Everything about this season of Lent is for us with open eyes and an open heart to be honest with a clear-eyed view of where we've been and where God calls us to be. The questions we need to ask ourselves are: Who is my source of life and strength? Who is my source of all that is true and holy?

There's a story told by Deborah Griffin Bly who sang in a Lutheran Church choir with her husband in NYC. After attending the evening Ash Wednesday service one year she and her husband were waiting for the subway when they were approached by a homeless man who pointed at their ashes on their forehead and kept asking them about the ashes on their foreheads. He kept asking, "Whose ashes are they? Which dead persons? They kept telling him they weren't from people but were from the palms from the previous Palm Sunday. But he replied that palms don't have ashes. He kept haranguing them until they boarded their train with him still yelling at them, "Who is on your heads"? As their train departed with this man convinced they were marked with human remains she thought in a way we are. It is Jesus on our heads. We are marked with the cross of Jesus and they not only represent all that Jesus sacrificed for us but all of our wounds, our memories, and all the deep connections we have with each other and with God. Who is on your head?

These ashes remind us of our connectedness and our disconnectedness to and from God. They remind us just how close or how far away God sometimes seems to be. These may be just a few ashes but they mean a lot. They are a symbol of our need for God. We are nothing but dust and ashes apart from God. They are also a symbol of our repentance. They are a way of showing on the outside what is happening on the inside that we are truly sorry for the hurtful things we have done.

This day asks us to remember who and what we are. Who we are is a group of fragile and imperfect people in need of love and forgiveness. What we are is the body of Christ and children of God. When you receive your ashes remember you bow your head to the God who created you, the God who sustains your life and who knows you inside and out. Remember this God loves you and gave himself to die on a cross so that you

might be free. Therefore as we cross ourselves with the ashes of our mortality let them be the ashes and the mark of Christ himself given for us all. Amen.