

Ash Wednesday Sermon
17 February 2010

Have you ever wondered just where the idea for Lent came from? Don't bother looking it up in a Bible Dictionary. You won't find it there at all. There is no such season in the New Testament. There is some evidence that for early Christians 40 was a significant length of time, and that they fasted for the forty hours between Good Friday and Easter, but the custom of spending forty days in prayer and self-denial did not arise until later, when the initial rush of Christian adrenaline was over.

The major internal crisis that early generations of believer had to deal with was when Jesus did not return as they understood Jesus to say that he would. When the world did not end as they literally believed Christ had prophesied, the early community of faith was tempted to stop expecting so much from God or even from themselves.

It is hard to believe but some Christians began to get a little ho hum about their faith. They hung a wooden cross on the wall, and settled back into their more or less comfortable routines, remembering their once passionate devotion to Christ the way they remembered the other enthusiasms of their youth.

Little by little Christians became devoted to their comforts instead. They liked the things that made them feel safe and cared for – if not by God, then at least by themselves. They convinced themselves that there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian, and before long it was very hard to pick them out from the population at large. They no longer distinguished themselves by their bold love for one another. They did not get arrested for championing the poor. They blended in. They avoided extremes. They decided to be nice instead of holy. And somebody heard God moan.

That someone decided that it was time to call Christians back to their senses, and the Bible offered some clues as to how to do that. Israel spent forty years in the wilderness learning to trust God. Elijah also spent forty days in the wilderness before hearing the sheer silence of God's voice. The prophet just happened to be on the same mountain where Moses spent forty days listening to God give the Law. Matthew, Mark, and Luke also tell of Jesus' own forty days in the wilderness where he was tested.

So the early church decided that forty days was a good period of time called for the season of Lent. The word "Lent" is from the old English word *Lenten*, which means Spring. It is not only a reference to the season of Spring, aren't we all ready for that, but also an invitation to a springtime of the soul. Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes of our spiritual senses to what remains and what is possible when all the comfort we are so comfortable with has been taken away.

I was looking at resources for Ash Wednesday on the United Methodist website, and I saw in bold letters, **Warning: Ashes and Water do not mix – will cause burning!**

And so they do. Mixed together they will form a substance that will burn the skin. But the image captured my imagination and I thought that it is even truer than the

physical effects of mixing ash and water. Water and ash are two of our most powerful symbols.

Water, used for baptism is where we are first marked with the sign of the cross representing birth, new life, renewal, and liberation from everything that enslaves us.

Today is Ash Wednesday, when we are once again marked with the sign of the cross, now representing our mortality, and all of our endings. To me, burning represents the power of the Holy Spirit coming alive in our lives, where the awareness of our finite time on this earth and the power of the resurrection combine to light the fire of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

I made the ashes we are using this evening. They are made from left over Palm crosses that were used in worship. I think they came out all right. In previous years I have had trouble getting the palms to burn down all the way. Some years I have just ordered the ashes from a liturgical catalogue. That's all right but it seems to lack something; makes it all a little less real. This morning I decided to soak the crosses in the lighter fluid that is used in the regular altar candles before lighting them. That actually worked pretty good. They burned right down.

I looked in the bowl, and my first thought was, "There's not much left." That's kind of the fear of our mortality; we will die. The message of Ash Wednesday is "Remember that from dust you came and to dust you return. But we also remember that this is not the end of the story. Ash Wednesday is not the end but a sacred beginning. Easter tells us that there is not just death and endings. Easter tells us the greater reality is that "Remember that from love you came and to love you shall return."

The gospel admonition that we should not practice our piety before others does seem a little odd for the imposition of ashes, which leaves a very public, obvious mark on us for all to see. Sometimes, I think we use this as an excuse to not let the fruit of our piety show at all.

The prophet, Joel, calls us to a "Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the people, sanctify the congregation" – what is his motivation here? Why do this? - so that people will not ask "where is their God?" Let us show forth the holiness of our creator, so people will know that we are a holy people – committed to God and committed to the community of faith of followers of Jesus Christ. How might we do this?

I want to suggest to you this evening that we move beyond giving up chocolate to declare a holy fast –

- Fast from passing judgement on others and nurture compassion toward others
- Fast from greed and nurture sharing
- Fast from feeding our fears and feast on that which nurtures peace
- Fast from lies and exaggerations and nurture humble truth
- Fast from gossip and nurture praise
- Fast from anxiety and nurture patience
- Fast from evil and nurture kindness
- Fast from apathy and cynicism and nurture engagement
- Fast from discontent and nurture gratitude
- Fast from noise and distractions and nurture your capacity for interior silence
- Fast from discouragement and nurture hope
- Fast from hatred and nurture love

So I ask you to ask yourselves as you receive the mark of the cross, what will be your fast this season of Lent. What will be your fast? And what graces will you nurture during these forty days?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Rev Stephen Hoffman
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First United Methodist Church of Palmetto