

Title: The Good News of Ash Wednesday
Date: 2/22/2023 (Ash Wednesday)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: Noon, 7pm Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Joel 2:1-2,12-17](#); [2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](#); [Matthew 6:1-6,16-21](#); [Psalm 103:8-14](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/A77rewGsuz4?t=540>

O God, on this day, Ash Wednesday, and throughout the forty days of Lent, help us see, help us recognize, that *now* is the acceptable time, *now* is the day of salvation!

Amen.

Happy Ash Wednesday!

Now you might be wondering, "What's so happy about being reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return?"

Ash Wednesday has a special place in my heart. It was the first of the major church feasts or fasts I meant to take part in. The first time I showed up at an Episcopal church, it was the first Sunday after Epiphany. At the time, I didn't know anything about the seasons of the church.

It was only later that I realized that I was seeking answers in the period of time that was actually designated for revelation, for things to be revealed. During those weeks, I began to learn what it means to be a Christian in the Episcopalian tradition. Call that sheer coincidence, or the workings of the Holy Spirit, either way, I stumbled into that convergence. It was a lovely and life-changing surprise.

By the time Ash Wednesday came around, I had taken a few classes in church, so I had a slightly better sense of what I was getting myself into. I knew it was the first day of the forty-day season of Lent. I knew that some people arranged to make their personal confession on this day. I knew that I would be reminded that I was made of dust.

Given that I came back to the church because of an existential crisis, because I had deep anxieties and fears and questions around death and mortality and, connected to that, the purpose of life, it seems ironic? paradoxical? perfect? that on the first major holy day I'd intentionally celebrate in the church, someone would mark my forehead with ashes and tell me, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

It is tempting to rush past this moment and start thinking about all the things we're going to give up or take on during Lent. There is a tension between the simplicity of Lent and all the options and opportunities for spiritual practice being pushed in our direction. There are daily devotionals and special workshops and quiet days and retreats, not to mention Lent Madness, which is like March Madness, but with Anglican saints in the brackets.¹

This is similar to the tension between reading a gospel about NOT practicing our piety before others, and then marking our forehead with ashes. Year after year I debated; should I get on the train with ashes on my forehead, or should I wipe it off in the bathroom before I walk out?

The people who paired this reading with the imposition of ashes couldn't have missed the way they contradicted each other. What are we supposed to do?

If you were expecting an answer from me, I'm sorry. Well, not that sorry.

Ash Wednesday invites us to sit with the tension of being a human being.

Yes, these ashes are a sign of our mortality and penitence. These ashes are ALSO a sign of our belovedness. For we are dust, AND we are filled with the breath of life. It is by God's gracious gift that we are given this life. We didn't have to earn it, nor do we need to earn our salvation.

It is already ours; will we accept it?

When we forget that we are already beloved, that we have nothing to earn and nothing to prove, we become focused on storing treasures on earth.

We buy into the myth of meritocracy and believe that if we work hard enough, we can control any outcome. We buy into the myth of self-sufficiency and treat others as if our success does not depend on anyone else or the structures of society. We buy into the myth of normalcy and spend our whole lives trying to fit into a standard-sized box, and when we don't, we believe that there is something wrong with us, or that we have done something wrong, even though there's no such thing in the first place.

In meditating on our mortality, we are invited to let go of all those myths. This doesn't mean we can do anything we want. This doesn't mean that nothing we do matters. We can't fully control the outcome, but we can live with intention. Whether we are giving alms, or praying, or fasting, or keeping that cross on our forehead, we can be self-aware enough to ask ourselves, "What kind of treasures are we storing up?"

The most popular class in the history of Yale is "Psychology and the Good life."² I want a class called "Christianity and the Good Death." Sitting with our mortality brings into sharp focus who and what is truly important to us. It reminds us who we belong to, who our lives belong to.

I don't have a curriculum, but I'm guessing a big part of it will be about right relationship, dying with the knowledge that we are in right relationship with God, our neighbors, ourselves -our own bodies- and God's creation.

After ashes are imposed on our foreheads, we will pray the litany of penitence. It is very long, it is very thorough, and it is **good news**.

There are all kinds of ways we have turned away from God, all kinds of ways we have separated ourselves from God. As we name them, let us remember that we are also listing all the ways we can return to God with all our heart.

There are so many ways we can turn back to God, and now is the acceptable time to start. Now is the day of salvation. Now as in today, now as in tomorrow and now as in the next forty days and all the days after.

Thanks be to God.

¹ <https://www.lentmadness.org/>

² <https://news.yale.edu/2018/02/20/yales-most-popular-class-ever-be-available-coursera>