

Shelter from the Storm

And so we begin another season of the church year – this is the first Sunday in Lent. This past week, we hosted a meaningful Ash Wednesday service with the Methodist church in town – and during this service, we placed ashes on the foreheads of nearly every person in the church.

A few chose not to receive ashes – my suspicion is that perhaps they felt uncomfortable with the whole idea, which may come from a history of misunderstanding many of us can claim. The teacher in me feels compelled to spend a little time exploring this very special season of Lent, beginning with Ash Wednesday; and considering how it can bring us God's peace as we journey together toward an empty tomb.

My first memory of Lent and Ash Wednesday comes from days long past...as a little girl growing up in the town of Mundelein, Illinois, (a town that was and is home to a beautiful Catholic seminary), I often wondered to myself what the big deal was with the black smudges that showed up magically on the faces of my Catholic friends in mid-February.

I knew it was part of their church stuff during some special days, and I also knew that somehow it had to do with the fact that they didn't eat any chocolate for what felt like a very long time. To add to the mystery, not long after Christmas, I would hear them whispering and asking each other what they would soon be "giving up for Lent."

Sometimes it was chocolate, sometimes it was Bazooka Bubble gum or Life Savers – almost all the time, it was candy of some kind – and I was in awe of their ability to hold true to their promise. I never saw them sneak a treat because they took the whole thing very seriously.

To me, it felt like they were part of a special club, and in that way seven-year-olds have of simplifying everything, I wanted a smudge too – though it would take more than that to get me to give up chocolate or any candy for even a day, much less many long weeks. My friends even had a special calendar on their bedroom wall, and each day, they would take a red grease pencil to mark an "X" in that date's box bringing them one day closer to the prize at the end of this torturous time: Easter Sunday, and the amazing basket full of candy goodies that would be hidden in their yard, just waiting to be dived into.

We all loved Easter because of the candy – but I'm pretty sure Jamie and Jody were especially ready for that day to arrive.

It seemed to me in those early 1960s that there were more specific lines drawn between the Protestants and the Catholics; we celebrated most of the same church holidays, but there was something very different about how we celebrated them. The Lutheran church my family attended didn't get ashes; it was definitely something that happened only in the Catholic Church of my girlhood friends.

But as I grew up - as the world became multicultural and Protestant church leaders tuned in to the deep significance of some of the practices of the early church, more and more churches adopted and modified the practice of the dispensation of ashes to the people. By the late 70s, some progressive congregations were offering two services on Ash Wednesday – one with ashes and one without – because not everyone was ready to receive them.

These days, it's very common for most churches to begin the Lenten season with a simple service which includes the ceremonial smudging of ashes made from leftover palms of the previous year's Palm Sunday, sealed with the words "remember you are but dust, and to dust you shall return."

Today, in a very meaningful way, Christians worldwide unite in remembrance and repentance on Ash Wednesday.

I was nearly 30 the first time I received ashes on my forehead – and this had come after several weeks of study about Lent in my Lutheran church in Philadelphia. It happened to occur during a time when I truly needed to hear a message of repentance and forgiveness, so it was especially meaningful; I finally got my smudge, and with it came an opportunity to look deeply into my sinful life to find God.

So, what precisely, is Ash Wednesday all about?

A day with a focus on repentance, it can probably be traced to the Jewish tradition of removing everyday clothes, stepping into sack cloth, and marking oneself with ashes to demonstrate sorrow in mourning - or remorse for sins and faults and recognition of the loss of one's better self.

Job was one who understood this concept - in this passage, Job has recognized that he didn't really appreciate what God did for him until he saw God face-to-face...he realizes he should have known better and now he feels shame, so he tells God...

"My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.

Therefore I despise myself □ and repent in dust and ashes."

The inclusion of the use ashes or some other mark to show remorse or separation from God occurs in several other books of the Bible including Numbers, Jonah, Matthew, Luke and Hebrews.

A very specific instance that could directly connect to Ash Wednesday is described in Chapter 9 of the book of Ezekiel, when at God's command, a linen-clad messenger is told to mark the forehead of folks in Jerusalem who feel sorrow and remorse because they realize they've sinned: "*...the LORD called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side and said to him, "Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it."* Once this was done, God commanded that all those without the mark should be killed.

No wonder the Jews took repentance seriously!

For us Christians, Ash Wednesday is the official beginning of the forty day season of Lent, when, like Jesus who was out in the desert dodging temptation from Satan for 40 days, we also face our own demons within, and hold fast onto our belief that God is still out there somewhere, waiting for us to call for help – waiting to take us in – waiting to give us shelter.

From the moment we step into the sanctuary to receive our very own smudge, our journey through Lent begins with an opportunity for public confession in our church community. No one is exempt from this scrutiny. We all make mistakes – we all have times of doubt and anger aimed at ourselves, at others, at God. Ash Wednesday provides a chance to publicly remember that we need God – and by physically marking ourselves as sinners, we not only share the need, but we also find comfort in the fact that we aren't alone in our sinfulness. We can see on each of our faces what we know deep down – we all sin and we all need God.

Through the long, somber season that follows, we are encouraged to look deeply inside ourselves to see what's lacking in our faith, in our life and in our faith-life. Emotionally, we peer into a 10 power mirror that shows us our truest selves, full of scars and bruises. It isn't pretty, this image of truth – and while our first instinct might be to run away from it, Lent provides believers with an escape valve – there are ways to redeem and renew ourselves, and return to God's protective embrace once again.

So our hearts take a journey for forty days – and during those days we can wash off the smudge and give ourselves a spiritual cleansing as we walk closer to Holy Week, an empty tomb and eternal life.

How can this happen?

Here are a few ideas.

Like Jesus in the desert, we can take some extra time for prayer or meditation each day to get more deeply into our selves, to examine those darker places within and to ask God to help us face our own temptations.

Like many good people of faith in the Bible, we can practice fasting or “giving up” some food or activity we enjoy to remind us of the sacrifice Jesus (and God!) made on our behalf.

We can remember and emulate Jesus’ good works, and challenge ourselves to add something to our lives...we could put in a day a week in volunteer service, or build a “spare change” fund for charity or maybe be purposefully patient or tolerant with someone who doesn’t quite fit in.

I’m sure you can think of other ways you could make Lent a more personal journey too.

In other words, we can use this time of Lent to refine and redefine how we live our faith – and look again to the protection of a God who loves us more than we can ever deserve. Psalm 91, our scripture for today, reminds us of the strength of that love...

Psalm 91 (Message)

*You who sit down in the High God's presence, spend the night in Shaddai's shadow,
Say this: "God, you're my refuge.*

I trust in you and I'm safe!"

*That's right—he rescues you from hidden traps,
shields you from deadly hazards.*

*His huge outstretched arms protect you—
under them you're perfectly safe;
his arms fend off all harm.*

*Fear nothing—not wild wolves in the night,
not flying arrows in the day,*

*Not disease that prowls through the darkness,
not disaster that erupts at high noon.*

*Even though others succumb all around,
drop like flies right and left,
no harm will even graze you.*

*You'll stand untouched, watch it all from a distance,
watch the wicked turn into corpses.*

*Yes, because God's your refuge,
the High God your very own home,*

*Evil can't get close to you,
harm can't get through the door.
He ordered his angels
to guard you wherever you go.
If you stumble, they'll catch you;
their job is to keep you from falling.
You'll walk unharmed among lions and snakes,
and kick young lions and serpents from the path.*

*"If you'll hold on to me for dear life," says God,
"I'll get you out of any trouble.
I'll give you the best of care
if you'll only get to know and trust me.
Call me and I'll answer, be at your side in bad times;
I'll rescue you, then throw you a party.
I'll give you a long life,
give you a long drink of salvation!"*

This psalm tell us that in spite of ourselves, God will always offer us a safe place – God will always watch out for us – all we have to do is remember, repent and ask.

The smudges of Ash Wednesday remind us who we are, and the forty days of Lent give us time to change. We'll walk through the stormy darkness of our lives, God will shelter us, and promises us there will be light at the end...thanks be to God!

Amen.