

# Ashes to Honesty

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,  
at the twelve o'clock service, February 22, 2012.  
The First Day of Lent: Ash Wednesday.  
Based on Isaiah 58:5-12 and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21.*

I grew up Baptist. We did not have Ash Wednesday. One morning in 7th grade, my new friend Cathy came to class a bit late, which was unusual. When we chatted after class, I noticed her forehead looked, well, dirty. Very unusual. I was concerned and embarrassed for her, so asked as tactfully as I could: Do you realize . . . ? Cathy smiled and said something about ashes and Lent. She answered my questions in English, but in a language I didn't speak. I think I looked at her like she had suddenly landed from a different planet.

Some years later I found my way into the Episcopal Church and discovered what Cathy had been trying to explain: Ash Wednesday and Lent.

Ash Wednesday does have to be one of the strangest days in the church year. We actually line up to have a cross of black ashes smudged onto our foreheads with the words, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." And to this reminder that we will die, many of us actually smile and say, "Thank you."

I've lived in several parts of the country and some other big cities, but only in New York have I experienced churches staying open for most or all of the day, so that people can come in to receive ashes—no service, if they choose, just ashes. Maybe that's because New Yorkers are so famously busy, or maybe it's because so many traditions flow together in this concentrated space.

We humans stand in line for a lot of things, but not often to be reminded so starkly of our mortality.

I have the privilege of receiving ashes. I also have the privilege of imposing ashes on the foreheads of people I know dearly, as well as on people I'm encountering for the first—and perhaps only—time in our lives. It is a humbling thing to physically touch even one forehead, let alone hundreds.

Each forehead is unique. There are all colors, all shades, from palest pearl to richest ebony. They range from the glow of health to the sallowness of unhealth. There is paper-dry skin, oily skin, sweaty skin. Rough, weathered skin; smooth skin. The fragile, thin, spotted skin of old age. The brand new, impossibly pink and delicate skin of a baby recently born.

Try saying, "You are dust and to dust you shall return" as you touch that baby skin or that ancient skin, and tell me you don't choke up.

There are brows furrowed with worry, brows yet unlined. It is deeply humbling to realize in that moment that each forehead is part of an entirely unique soul created by God, beloved of God—a living soul with its own set of life experiences, its own troubles and particular joys, its own hopes and dreams and fears.

All of us are different. Each of us is entirely unique. And yet, for this one moment at least, all of us are the same.

Ash Wednesday begins our season of Lent. Lent has carried a lot of baggage over the years—over the centuries, actually—from the 300's when observing this season became part of the early church tradition. Somehow it helps me to know that these 40 days of Lent were intended to help followers of Jesus recall and identify more closely with Israel's 40 years in the wilderness, and with Jesus' own 40 days in the wilderness, fasting and facing temptation, the better to help us enter more deeply into the meaning and joy of Easter and the Resurrection. These are not bad things.

I suggest that we might let Ash Wednesday, this first day of Lent, lead us into a season of greater honesty with ourselves. We might see Ash Wednesday not as the kickoff to some set of spiritual Olympics, or something to get a check mark from God, but as a door opening into a space where we can try to get more honest about ourselves. About *ourselves*, not our neighbors.

In my own experience, when I focus my energy on getting more honest about myself, I find I have less energy and inclination for judging others. Like the passage from Matthew's gospel advises: be aware of my own motivation for doing something, especially something "good," like praying, or being generous, or fasting from whatever poisons my body or soul. If I can get honest with myself for *why* I am doing something, even something so simple as making the sign of the cross, then I believe I grow closer to God, to myself, to others. Those are all somehow related.

Take a look at the Litany of Penitence, which we'll all say together in a few minutes. What happens if we see it as a help in getting more honest with ourselves, rather than a way to beat ourselves up?

This Litany is one of my favorite discoveries in the Episcopal Church. (Strange, but true.) Every Ash Wednesday I cut it out of the bulletin and put it on my refrigerator. That's not about eating (though I have to be honest and say that's certainly applicable); it's just an everyday place where I know I'll see the list each day, several times a day.

This Litany really is the most complete and most elegant list of "sins" I've ever found. I'm not interested in a catalog of sins, or in ranking which one is worse than another. As I've noted in a past sermon, the most helpful understanding of "sin" to me is as separation—separation from God, from others, even from myself. I wonder: does it offer more spaciousness in your understanding to say, "We confess . . . that we have *separated* by our own fault in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone," substituting "separated" for "sinned."

Then take into yourself the list that follows—a very concrete, practical list, that I'd guess most of us can relate to. I know I relate to every item there. One of the confessions in our newer liturgical materials contains this line, "We repent of the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf." When I say that, even when I think I haven't done anything wrong or left something undone, it reminds me that I am complicit in some of the systems that are not making this world a better place. Strong stuff, this honesty.

The awareness that can come from spending time with this Litany is not about making ourselves feel worse, but about creating some spaciousness in our souls and letting honesty clean house a bit.

In one of his recent sermons, Buddy remarked on the spaciousness of this magnificent place, noting this spaciousness has much to teach us. It teaches us about the spaciousness our souls long for, about spaciousness in relationship, about the spaciousness of grace.

This ancient season of Lent, starting with this truly odd day of Ash Wednesday, is not an empty ritual of the past. It's not just for show, or to try to please God, or to get a check mark from God. We already have that.

My hope is that you will find a beauty and power in Ash Wednesday, and spaciousness of soul in this season of Lent that it begins.

This year Ash Wednesday feels to me like that storm that blows the last leaves off the trees in fall, revealing things as they really are. I'm thinking of Lent as a winter season, winter being a season of honesty. In winter we are able to see, and appreciate, the spare, stark beauty of the trees when the leaves are blown away. We can see the outlines of the terrain; we can see the true shape of the mountains; we can see what the contours of the land really are. We can revel in the splendid emptiness of a Northeast beach in winter. We can see things as they really are. And even as we see things as they are, we know that there is more there than we can see. Unseen, change is occurring.

As this Ash Wednesday service continues, listen to the words of these ancient psalms and scriptures and hymns and prayers. Let them soak into your soul.

In a way that feels right to you, let honesty clear some space in your soul in this season of Lent, and let your soul breathe more deeply. Paradoxically, you may find that bringing you closer to God, to others, to yourself.

I wish you a holy Lent, my friends.

Amen.

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