

# LAMENTING WHILE WEARING ASHES

## A sermon for Ash Wednesday

Jesus instructs us to pray in private. And then there's Ash Wednesday, one of the most public days of the Christian year. What other day do Christians from liturgical churches have a visible mark on their skin?

Not a rose tattoo, mind you. Not even Luther's rose. No. Ashes. A reminder that from earth we come and to earth we shall return.

Ashes? In the Ukraine, ashes of invasion and ongoing war. In the Sudan, ashes of hunger. In Palestine, Israel and Gaza, ashes of terrorism. In Syria, ashes from the funeral pyres. From 1933 to 1945, not so long ago, the sickening ashes of stoves in Nazi extermination camps. Ashes of death that some now want to deny. In Western Carolina and upper East Tennessee, ashes of floods, the destruction of a wayward hurricane.

In our own lives, ashes of bruised relationships and fractured families. Ashes of failed commitments, broken promises, uncontrolled tempers.

Ashes of racism and sexism.  
Ashes of prejudice and ignorance.  
Ashes of stinginess and greed.

Ashes of fear among our marginalized neighbors, especially those living with the anxiety of immigration resettlement. Ashes of uncertainty for members of this congregation employed by the federal government at Oak Ridge and DC and the national park.

There are enough ashes to go around. How can we not lament? What other godly way is there. God is agitated. That's a description of God in many biblical passages. God is agitated, agitated in both compassion and distress. Most of all, the Bible tells us, God is agitated at suffering and injustice. God is agitated at us.

God is agitated, my friends. God is appalled. God weeps. God the

lover longs for us to return  
Godward, with tears.

You've been marked with a cross  
tonight. How's that for a sign of  
love? The ashes of death, the  
cross of life.

It happens sometimes without us  
noticing. We die inside. We  
become numb to suffering,  
habituated to the sly creep of  
resignation, inured to the ways the  
powers and principalities exercise  
their insidious reign.

Then, once a year at the starting  
line of Lent, there is this day of  
ashes. The starter's pistol goes off  
and we race to leave the numbness  
behind.

You can't race by yourself. No,  
this is not something we do alone.  
I hope there's nobody at home  
marking a big cross on their  
noggin with black shoe polish or a  
magic marker or ground-up  
chocolate chips. This is a  
communal experience. Part of the  
power of this day is the witness of  
our collective, public lament.

In America, we have this pathetic privatizing of religion. Jesus Christ is my personal Lord and Savior, all that me and Jesus nonsense. The Christian faith is not only trust in Christ to make our individual lives whole and complete. It is the proclamation that Jesus is the savior of the world. How in the world can you have privatized religion around here when you are seated in the midst of a bunch of fellow believers wearing crosses on their foreheads? We do this together. This is symbolic of how we are to live, who we are to be.

Now let us turn our hearts and actions to this savior of the world. Today is the business of our family tending to the state of our own house. Ashes on our foreheads, we lament the state of the earth and its inhabitants, its wounds and cries, and the silence and dust of death. In repentance, we lament our own complicity in the inflicting of earth's wounds. Our standing by when earth and its creatures are wounded.

And as big of a mess as we have made of this earth, it hardly compares to the mess we've made of human life. Let us lament all the times we have distanced ourselves from others. Others, who like us, are made of earth; with whom we will share on this earth the same dusty end.

Our public witness, being marked with an ash-y cross, denouncing the powers and lamenting for the world, our public witness is tempered by our private Lenten practices of fasting, prayer, almsgiving. These remind us that we witness not to show ourselves but for the sake of God's righteousness, together in Christian community, with God's love and lament for earth and its creatures.

Ash Wednesday begins the church's long retreat in preparation to celebrate the central mysteries of our faith: the gathering at the table, the washing of the feet, the cross, the death, the silence of the tomb and the resurrection.

This Lenten time is a journey for the sake of life. It begins with the acknowledgement of all that deadens and kills.

To lament is to tell the truth. To lament is to witness. To lament is to denounce. And to lament is to somehow hope.

Justice, healing, repentance: they all begin in tears. They will not end there, but there is no detour on this journey to Holy Week.

Do you not think that God is weeping these days?