

## Ash Wednesday Meditation

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Historically, we Protestants have not tended to act out our piety liturgically, and there are at least a couple of very good reasons for this liturgical reticence.

In the first place, we were born at the end of the Medieval period of the western European church – in fact, our birth helped to end the Medieval period in Europe – and that church was steeped in both ritual and superstition.

Churches were draped – some would say smothered – in religious decoration.

Priests were garbed in sometimes beautiful, sometimes gaudy and always expensive vestments.

Processions inside and outside church buildings took the faithful from shrines to altars to cemeteries to fields.

Prayers were spoken, chanted, and sung in a language fewer and fewer people understood, including the priests and choristers who spoke, chanted, and sung them.

Holy days and feast days and fast days and saints' days and days of obligation ordered time for Medieval Christians as surely and as regularly as the agricultural seasons.

The universe of the ordinary Christian of the Middle Ages was populated by scores of divine, semi-divine, demonic, and malevolent beings and forces.

Death was both an omnipresent reality in this life, and a terrifying threat of the life to come. And the Medieval church sought, through much of its liturgical repertoire, both to utilize the fear of death for its advantage and to provide some measure of comfort against it for the ordinary believer.

We Protestants reacted against both the superstition and the ritual that accompanied it. Purgatory, for example, that realm of spiritual limbo that was not heaven nor hell nor earth, was rejected from Protestant teaching, along with the prayers for those who were once believed to be in Purgatory. We Protestants took a common-sense approach to death that we understood to be biblically based: until Judgment Day, at least, the dead are dead, and when you're dead, you're dead.

And with that common-sense, evidence-based view of life and death came a new and sometimes unfortunate emphasis on the literal meaning of Scripture, an emphasis that bedevils Protestant theology to this day.

When Jesus told his followers to beware of practicing their piety before others, for example, as you heard me read from the Gospel of Matthew a few minutes ago, Protestants took his words quite literally, and we moved services such as Ash Wednesday to the evening hours, as we do here at Faith, so that our smudge of ash will be visible for only a brief time, in the darkness, and only to a few.

And many Protestant churches have done away with Ash Wednesday services altogether in their desire to rid themselves of some of the last remnants of Medieval Catholicism.

But we here at Faith are a bit less reactionary than that and a bit less literalistic in our interpretation of Jesus's words. The annual reminder of both our physical and spiritual finitude is not Catholic; it's human and it's universal and it's salutary. To be reminded of our limits, both physical and moral, is to help us see the boundaries within which we must live both our physical and spiritual lives. In our tradition, the intertwining of moral sin and physical death is represented by our central symbol, the cross. Sin is as inevitable as death for a human being. None of us gets it right all the time, just as none of us, as Janis Joplin so famously said of life, gets out of this alive.

And just as we must make the best job we can of life in the face of our inevitable death, so, too, must we make the best job we can of life even in the face of our inevitable failures of love and courage – our sins, in other words.

So to be marked with the sign of the empty cross in ash is not a sign of resignation or defeat, whatever the Old Testament origins of putting ashes on oneself as a mourning custom. For us who have taken for ourselves the name of Christian, to be marked with Christ's empty cross is, rather, a declaration of intent. It is our statement of defiance and determination. The empty cross on our foreheads or on the backs of our hands indicates our willingness to engage the fight with every form of sin and death in the name of the one whose empty cross we will, for a few moments, literally wear and bear. For the genuinely penitent Christian – the one who takes both sin and Christ's victory over sin seriously – this service is the equivalent of New Year's Day. It is our moment to begin again in our resolve to live our lives in the right direction.

The burned palms that you now wear on your hand or head may indeed represent the death of our vainglorious ambitions and mortal bodies, but they also represent the death of the life held captive by a besetting sin in particular or by sin in general. The radical transformation of a palm frond to a cross of ashes represents the degree to which change is possible. The ashen cross is a powerful symbol of before-and-after, and repentance is the divine flame of love that makes such a transformation possible.

"Who then devised the torment?" T. S. Eliot asked in *Little Gidding*, and he answered, "Love."

"Love is the unfamiliar Name

Behind the hands that wove

The intolerable shirt of flame

Which human power cannot remove.

We only live, only suspire,

Consumed by either fire or fire.”

To be inflamed by God’s love for the whole world is to have our small, finite lives reduced to ashes so that we may rise to new life as Christ rose from the death he had endured for our sakes on the cross. That’s why we willingly, if not happily, mark ourselves with an ashen cross on Ash Wednesday. To be reminded of that reality once a year, in a simple service of confession, reflection, and the brief wearing of ash, seems to me not a burden to be borne stoically or furtively, but rather a gift to be received gratefully. Perhaps the originators of our ritual tonight achieved more than they intended or could ever have known.