

Ash Wednesday
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Unearthing our Earthiness

In her book, *Girl Meets God*, Lauren Winner describes her experience of Ash Wednesday, “The imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday is nothing if not bold. The whole day is bold. There is a bold gash of ecclesiastical purple hanging on the wall of my Puritan-white Episcopal church. My priest wears an equally startling purple chasuble, which he will wear for all of Lent. The Book of Common Prayer prompts us to say bold things: that we have been ransomed by a man on a cross. The ashes are the boldest of all: a dark and undeniable slash across your forehead, a bold proclamation of death and resurrection. You attend an Ash Wednesday service, but you forget that the ashes have been, in the churchly idiom, imposed on your head, and you walk out of church with this brash living reminder that Christ died for us.

The first time I observed this ritual, I got stares on the subway. There might be some neighborhoods in New York where forehead crosses on Ash Wednesday are commonplace, but not my subway line full of

West Side sophisticates. That first Ash Wednesday, as today, I felt unhidden, uncloseted. The ashes on my forehead told a story to the people I walked past all day.”

Ash Wednesday is a bold day: the stark purple color now adorning our church, the invitation that calls us to self-examination, prayer and fasting throughout these 40 days and of course the ashes marked across our foreheads reminding us not only of Christ’s death and resurrection, but of our own mortality: *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.* We leave the church and we yet can’t leave behind what we have just experienced; for the ashen cross goes with us out into the world. We do feel unhidden and uncloseted, as Winner says. The reminder of our mortality and of our deep need for repentance is branded on our foreheads for all to see. We can’t escape it.

I always thought it was amusing that in the first community I served as a priest –Morehead, KY, I’d get more of a reaction from strangers at WalMart because of the ashen cross than because of the clergy collar I wore. Of all our liturgies, this is the one when you leave the church doors, people know where you’ve been and what you’ve been doing.

The irony of this day is that what we do publicly and what we hear in Scripture appear to be in conflict with each other. In Matthew's Gospel passage, Jesus warns us not to practice our piety before others, but to give alms, to pray and to fast in secret only before our God. The prophet Joel says to rend our hearts and not our clothing. The point is not to get so caught up in the public display, but to humbly turn ourselves to God in acts of genuine, heartfelt penitence.

The ashen cross streaked across our foreheads is as public a display of piety as it gets for us. And yet I think that marking ourselves with the cinders from the palms of previous Palm Sunday celebrations is not actually at odds with Matthew and Joel's words. In fact, I think in its essence the ashen cross reminds us of our humbleness before God and invites us into a season of humility.

Humility comes from the Latin word, *humus* meaning "of the earth" or "of the ground". The ashes placed on our foreheads for all to see are signs of our humble origins. We are the descendants, the sons and daughters of Adam, who was formed from the *Adamah*-the dust of the ground. In this public display of unearthing our earthiness we are seized by a humbling sense of what it means to be human-what it means to be finite beings, limited by our own experiences and perceptions, and finally limited by our own mortality. In this act of

piety we stand naked before our God, stripped of the false pretense that we have no need of God, that we can become like God ourselves.

Some of us will leave this service and immediately try to wipe off our ashes before we go on to the next thing. We can remain unhidden and uncloseted for only so long. Some of us will forget the ashes are there and the stares of someone in Genuardis will hearken us back us to what we did and said only hours ago in the liturgy. Some of us will go to sleep with the ashes creating an imprint on our nice, white pillowcases. In the morning the ashes will have vanished and yet the mark of our earthiness will never truly vanish.

Our task in this season of Lent is to continue to lay bare our lives and our souls to God as we do in this very liturgy and so unearth all the ways in which we turn away from dependence on our loving Creator, too often fooling ourselves into believing that we have no need of the One who formed us from the dust of the ground.