

Ash Wednesday  
February 17, 2010  
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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

*Scriptures: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; 2Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21*

### **Lent Is Here**

The time of Lent has arrived. It has crept on here and now without us realizing. We didn't see it coming, it just showed up. It is time a marked with reflection, self examination and confession of sins. And this couldn't have happened at a more inappropriate time. We were in the midst of dancing and celebration. We were singing alleluias and glory to God in the highest. Things were good, our life was calm. We had plans for a good and stable future. Let the good times roll—we were saying—before noticing that small funky looking smudge in our foreheads. What is it?—we wonder—and just then we discern what appears to be a cross. It is a cross! So, we finally realize, it is Lent. It is that time associated with praying, almsgiving and fasting. We find ourselves wearing black, our foreheads marked with ashes, and Jesus saying “beware.”

Here's what I'm trying to say. The way our liturgical calendar is arranged we go in a matter of 10 to 12 weeks from the joyful celebration of Christmas and Epiphany to the deep, solemn commemoration of Lent. It happens very fast! We celebrate Jesus birth, we witness his baptism, we proclaim him God of all nations, and then we start walking to Jerusalem. More to the point, that fast, sudden, movement from elation to desperation is characteristic of many facets of life. When trauma hits unexpectedly like that it tends to leave a lasting mark. To this day I still remember where I was and what I was doing the day the twin towers in New York came crumbling down. It was an awakening and a rupturing of our innocence. Not only did we think that it couldn't happen here, we were devastated by the immense suffering that it brought over us. We were equally taken by surprise when Katrina literally destroyed New Orleans. The Big Easy, where party and festivity has always been part of daily life, became the big tragedy. So many lives lost, so much mourning for thousands of families. And so around the world, countless tragedies have brought many out of slumber into the reality of a world where suffering is very much part of life. Acts of nature like the tsunami in Indonesia and the recent earthquake in Haiti. Heinous acts of humanity like the genocide in Darfur and the mass shootings in our schools. In fact, some places have seen it so many times that they have never known a life without pain.

Against this backdrop we celebrate tonight our service of Ash Wednesday. Part of it is to hear the chilling words spoken as ashes are smeared on our foreheads, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return!” Do we need this reminder of the fragility of life? Have we not been bombarded with images that make the denial of loss and death nearly impossible? Are there not other words that might be spoken better suited to the occasion? A couple nights ago I was laying there on bed without been able to sleep. Too many things in my head were keeping my mind too busy to be able to let myself go. So, what is there to do in the middle of a sleepless night than to start writing your Ash

Wednesday sermon? So I started reviewing those words in my mind. “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” What do they mean? Why do we need to hear them? What’s the purpose? I mean, with all what happens in our surroundings there’s no way we can forget what we are. Or maybe we do forget.

Our traditions and customs seem to try to put away the things we don’t like. Take for example the day before Ash Wednesday. We call it Mardi Grass, or Fat Tuesday. Some of you may not know that we call it that because it is the day in which we are allowed to eat anything we want. It is an –all-you-can-eat-anything-goes kind of day. It is the last hooray before the beginning of lent. We can eat and be merry now, because starting tomorrow we have no chance for more than 40 days. Let’s do whatever we want because then we go into making sacrifices; we give up the things we like supposedly as a sacrifice to God. I don’t know about you, but to me it seems like and attempt to negate what we do in Lent. Lent is a time when we strip away all of the frills to get to the basics of life. All the excess and self satisfaction are supposed to be replaced by self imposed limits and sacrifice. As Jesus points out in the gospel, the idea is not to make acts of self-piety. That would turn our sacrifice into sinful acts of self justification. No; the idea is to remember the things that are really necessary. We live not out of the many things we have and enjoy in life, but we live out of God. We are called to rediscover who we are as God’s people. We are called to face our fears and our failures with courage and dignity, relying on God’s love and mercy. We are called to be God’s children and to depend on our Creator and Sustainer.

Nevertheless, the ashes, the cross, and the remembrance of our limited situation are not only an accusation of our sinful nature. In those symbols and words there is also promise and hope. The symbol of the cross on our foreheads is also a reminder that we belong to God. It is the same cross, made out of cleansing water and fragrant oil, that was marked on our foreheads the day we were baptized. On that day we were claimed as God’s. As Mónica said in her reflection last Sunday, we may not know what’s ahead on our road, but we know that Jesus is the road. So yes, we need to hear those words of remembrance even if we rather not because there’s life, not only death, in them. Because when we are able to remember that we are limited in our nature, we also remember that we have nothing else but God to give us promise of life. Let’s then not fear or tremble at the coming of Lent. Instead, let us be willing to let go of our attempts of making it on our own and humbly but with hope rest assured in the assurance of God’s forgiveness and love. Amen.