

Ash Wednesday Meditation
March 1, 2017
“Ashes”
Psalm 51

Introduction

We buried Betty “Bangs” Erwin yesterday. There was a profound significance of standing in a cemetery the day before Lent begins and committing her body to the ground but her soul to resurrection to life eternal.

Standing there, I recalled the year I buried Emma Brooks at a graveside service on Ash Wednesday. When her daughter, Mary Ann, asked if we could schedule the service on that day, I had said, “That will be profound, to be in the cemetery on Ash Wednesday. Do you want me to bring some ashes?” “Sure,” Mary Ann had said. “We should do that.”

So, at the time of the committal, when the words were said, “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” instead of sprinkling dirt over the grave, I sprinkled ashes.

Then at the close of the service, I announced that the imposition of ashes was available for anyone who chose to receive them, and some individuals came forward for ashes.

The man from the funeral home said, “Well, that is something new. I have worked hundreds and hundreds of funerals, but never before have I seen that done at one.”

Then I left the cemetery and started driving toward Gastonia, where my mother was dying. “Tell Mom I love her, and I am on my way,” I had told the Hospice nurse when she called me. “Tell her if she is ready to go on, she does not have to wait for me.”

“I have a feeling she will wait,” the nurse had said.

Mom was still breathing when I got there, her heart was still beating, but her pupils were fixed. Her soul was departing, as her body was winding down. Mom had always been a tireless worker, with a big, strong heart. I knew, even at 92, it would take a while to wind down. So I took my container of ashes and made a cross on Mom’s forehead.

My brother said, “You had better explain to the nurses what that is. I think it is new to them.”

I

I am amazed at how many people think Lent and Ash Wednesday are something new. Granted, we have not always had Lent. Look for the word in a Bible dictionary or concordance, and you will not find it.

Nor will you find Lenten disciplines. There is some evidence that early Christians fasted forty hours between Good Friday and Easter, but the custom of spending forty days in prayer, self-denial, and confession did not come until later, when believers had become a little complacent about their faith.

When Jesus did not return and bring the end of the world, as the early followers expected, the believers stopped expecting so much from God and from themselves. They settled down to normal, comfortable routines.

Before long, it was hard to pick out Christians from the population at large. No longer did they distinguish themselves with bold love for each other and charitable acts of kindness. No longer did they champion the needs of the poor and share their faith with those around them.

The church decided it was time to call Christians back. The Bible offered some clues for doing that:

- Israel spent forty years in the wilderness, learning to trust God;
- Moses spent forty days on a mountain receiving the law from God.
- Elijah spent forty days alone on the same mountain before he heard the small, still voice of God.
- And, of course, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness before his ministry began, being tested by the devil.

So the church decided we would have a season of Lent that is derived from an old English word “Lenten,” which refers to spring and the time of the lengthening of days.

Lent would become a “springtime” for the soul. Forty days to do spring cleaning, cleanse the system, and get down to the basics. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God, rather than trying to live by our own merits.

II

And Lent starts with ashes. And ashes you will find in the Bible.

Tonight our daughter and her family are attending Ash Wednesday Service at their church in Memphis. When she told me that, I remembered how when she was only a few years older than her daughter is now, she left the Ash Wednesday Service at the church where her dad was pastor. It was time for everyone to walk to the front for the imposition of ashes. Only instead of walking to the front, Susan got up and walked out the back door.

“I do not understand why you do that,” she said later. “It is pagan.”

“Well actually,” I said, “it is all through the Bible, New and Old Testaments. People using ashes to grieve; people using ashes to recognize their mortality; people using ashes to confess their sinfulness.”

“Well, I will have not part of it,” she said. “I think it is barbaric. ”And besides,” she said, “those ashes are dirty.”

Ash Wednesday makes us wrestle with what we want to have no part of, what we work hard to avoid. Nobody wants to think about death or sin, and Ash Wednesday puts these things front and center, right smack in the middle of our foreheads. And Susan was right; it is dirty business.

Psalm 51 was spoken, sung, and later penned by someone who understood about being dirty. Look at the verbs of request to God: wash, cleanse, purge, blot out.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” We pray the Psalmist’s prayer every year on the first day of Lent, because every year we come to Lent needing to be cleansed.

And what we find is that the saving grace of the cross is exactly what is needed for cleaning something as dirty as sin.

So we prayed, “Lord, I repent in dust and ashes.” Then we invited the Spirit to come and cleanse within. “Create in me a clean heart, O God.”

Conclusion

Lent. Six and a half weeks. Not long, really. And yet a lot can happen in six and a half weeks as we make this journey.

As you journey, pray, like I asked the children to do. Perhaps simple breathe prayers.

You will get through this season, and the end of Lent will come. And the stone will roll back, and you will find the dirty smudge of sin and death washed, cleansed, purged, and blotted out by the bright light of resurrection.

May God make this a holy Lenten season for each of us. Amen.