

## **ASH WEDNESDAY**

### **February 17, 2010**

All over the world today, millions of people are gathering together as we are, to be marked with ashes in the sign of the cross on their foreheads, as they hear a sobering though simple statement: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

It was a late afternoon on an Ash Wednesday some years ago when I was working as a hospice chaplain in one of the transitional seasons of my life. I went to the 5:30 service in the chapel at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in Rome, Georgia. As I participated in the service, I kept thinking of the way in which I had begun my day. I went first thing that morning to visit a patient I hadn’t seen in a week or two. We had gotten to know each other from my previous visits. He was awake and genuinely happy to see me when I walked into his room. We had a brief conversation and then he drifted off into sleep. And in a matter of moments, he died peacefully. I waited until the nurse came to pronounce him dead. And I met the people from the Cremation Society who came to take his body. When I heard those sobering yet simple words spoken to me, as the priest placed ashes on my forehead, I couldn’t help but wonder if the hospice patient I had visited that morning had already literally returned to dust. I never felt quite as I did that Ash Wednesday, the power of the ritual we observe today.

In the second chapter of Genesis we read, “The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground.” There, in that simple statement is the source of today’s ritual. But we need to go one sentence farther in that portion of Genesis to find another reason, perhaps the real reason why we do this. After the dust was formed into our humanity, we read that “God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” No sooner does the Bible say that our humanity is dust than it tells us that God has breathed into our dust God’s own divine life.

It’s this life we are given as gift that is the focus of our Lenten journey. And we start this journey acknowledging our need for repentance and forgiveness. Paul the Apostle encourages us to ‘be reconciled to God.’ He urges us ‘not to accept the grace of God in vain’ and that, actually, right now is ‘the acceptable time.’ The poetry of Isaiah we hear in our first lesson speaks about the sort of fast the Lord calls us to do. It’s more than just ‘giving up’ something during Lent like desert or alcohol, the things we might really enjoy. It’s about doing things which can deepen our awareness and open our hearts toward greater compassion for others. It’s easy to talk about the world’s problem of hunger and to feel sorry that millions of people go to bed hungry each day. But not until we feel hunger in our own body is there a real impact: empathy is much stronger than pity. Empathy should lead us to action. This is the sort of fasting the prophet Isaiah exhorts us to do: to open our minds and hearts and souls to God’s reconciling love in Christ at the center and core of who we are as a faith community – and then to reach out in compassion to others as our Compassionate God reaches out to us.

“Healing a hurting world” is the theme found in this year’s Lenten Meditations provided by Episcopal Relief and Development. And to be an instrument of healing for the world, we need first to ask and receive the healing strength of God’s Spirit.

Sister Claire Joy, who designed and wrote this year’s Lenten Devotional, says in the introduction, “The world is hurting. But we, as individuals, are also hurting. Economic woes,

illness, personal scars from childhood traumas, and the simple weariness of constant daily challenges have all taken their toll.

“We *need* healing, *need* forgiveness, *need* God.”

Lent is a time to feed our spirit. Or perhaps better stated, for God to feed our spirit through Christ. Matthew encourages us at the start of the Lenten season not to store up for ourselves treasures on earth but rather store up for ourselves treasures in heaven – to reflect and act upon where our treasure is, for that’s where we find our heart. And Lent is about hearts – hearts turning anew to God, hearts opening to healing grace, hearts touched by the forgiving and reconciling love of God in Christ, hearts moved by compassionate care for others, willing to risk letting ourselves feel the sufferings of others, even when we do not suffer in the same way ourselves. The seeds of compassion are a divine gift and grow only through cultivation and practice, starting with those in our immediate world.

We begin anew our journey from ashes to Easter with an invitation ‘to the observance of a holy Lent.’ May our hearts be open and receptive to the breath of God’s Spirit within and among us, leading and guiding us to the One who forgives, heals and transforms us through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Amen.