

Ash Wednesday

(Cycle ABC)

READING I: Isaiah 58:1-12* **DATE:** 02/17/2010
READING II: 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10 **PLACE:** Corpus Christi
GOSPEL: Matthew 6:1-6,16-21* **TIME:** 7:30 p.m.
EVENT: Ecumenical Service

THEME: Dust calls us to remember our creation and our living out our lives for the welfare of others by the grace of God.

I. Remembering We Are Dust

- In just a few moments, you will be invited to come forward and one of our ministers will impose ashes on your forehead, saying, “Remember, you are dust and unto dust you shall return.”
 - Sounds pretty morbid to me.
 - That’s why Catholics just *love* Ash Wednesday!
- There is another formula that we could use: “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel.”
 - Some prefer that formula because it has a more positive sense to it: it makes us active participants, having some sense of control in what we’re supposed to be about.
 - But the old-time stalwarts find that formula rather wimpy and pollyannish: give us that old-time dust stuff!

II. Remembering Our Creation

- But remembering that we are dust isn’t simply about remembering our mortality: it’s also about remembering our creation.
 - Remember, God formed us out of the dust from the earth.
 - Dust is about our *beginning*, too – not simply about our *end*.
- And, if we remember that God breathed life into the dust that had been formed from the ground, then dust also tells us something about how we *exist* in the world.
 - It tells us that, while our *physical* presence in the world may be one rooted in dust, our *living* presence is one rooted in the very breath of God.
 - Acknowledging that we are dust reminds us that it is only by the grace of God that we have life; otherwise, we are nothing but dust.

- But that same creation story also tells us about the reality of evil in ourselves and in our world.
- An evil that comes about because of our own choices, to be sure; but also an evil that is just there, before we make any choice.
- Evil that injures our relationship with God, with one another, and with creation itself.

III. Recognizing God's Grace in Lent

- Viewed in the context of creation, then, Lent is much more about life in God's grace and the barriers that hinder our reception of that grace than it is about our own mortality.
- And that's important to keep in mind, because often our Lenten practices take on more of a spiritual self-help program than a process of recognizing the grace of God in our lives.
- We give up smoking, we go on a diet, we promise to go to the gym – all of which are noble aspirations, but have little to do with Lent.
- When God through the prophet Isaiah chastises the people for their practice of fasting, God starts off by noting that “on your fast day you carry out *your own pursuits*.”
- Jesus echoes this language in the gospel, when he warns his disciples to be on guard against performing religious deeds in public for all to see.
- Because, ultimately, if our Lenten practices are about our own self-improvement, then that's about all we can expect from them: bigger biceps, slimmer waists, and fewer hacking coughs.

IV. Living in God's Grace

- And so, contrary to what some of our instincts might be – at least some of our *Catholic* instincts – Lent is not so much about looking inward, as it is about looking outward.
- For the grace of God does not draw us within ourselves; it impels us into all of creation with our hearts open to the presence of God in life.
- And God is not simply alive within *us*; God is alive within *creation* – remember, you are dust, and unto dust you shall return.
- And part of opening ourselves up to God's grace is acknowledging and overcoming the barriers to that grace.
- It's about confronting the evils of selfishness and injustice and sin in our lives.

- This is part of our Tri-Church education series this Lent, as we examine how our three traditions confront evil in the world through baptism, penance, and, yes, even exorcism.
- But, for now, we see that same confrontation in God's words through the prophet Isaiah, when God first outlines the type of fasting God desires, and then expresses the consequences of that fasting using images of creation:

- This, rather, is the fasting that I wish:
 releasing those bound unjustly,
 untying the thongs of the yoke;
 Setting free the oppressed,
 breaking every yoke;

Sharing your bread with the hungry,
 sheltering the oppressed and the homeless;
 Clothing the naked when you see them,
 and not turning your back on your own.

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn. . . .
Then light shall rise for you in the darkness,
 and the gloom shall become for you like midday;
Then the Lord will guide you always
 And give you plenty even on the parched land.
 God will renew your strength,
 and you shall be like a watered garden,
 like a spring whose water never fails.

- The type of religious practice that God prefers is the kind that draws us out of ourselves.
- The type of practice that is not engaged primarily for *our* benefit, but for the benefit of *others*.
- The kind of practice that brings us into right relationship with each other and then restores our relationship with God and creation.
- So that, when we adopt for Lent the three spiritual practices of prayer, almsgiving, and fasting that Jesus commends to us in today's gospel, we do so for the benefit of others.
- We empty ourselves, not so that we can lighten our press against the bathroom scale, but so that we can fill ourselves with the grace of God that unites us with all creation.
- It's pretty hard to be full of grace if we're full of ourselves.

V. Conclusion

- So, as you come forward this evening to receive ashes on your forehead, do not bow your head like a reed, and lie in sackcloth and ashes (well, for tonight, ashes are O.K.).

- Instead, hold your head high and remember that you live by the grace of God.
- Remember that you come to restore your relationship with the very creation of which you are a part.
- Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return.