



Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21

Sermon

St. Michael Lutheran Church

Wednesday, February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2008

Ash Wednesday

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## "Out of the Ashes"

Last night as I sat in my recliner with my belly full of pancakes and my head swirling with political jargon from watching too much Super Tuesday coverage, I could not imagine the starkness of today. I could not imagine entering the desolate desert of Ash Wednesday, the wandering wilderness of Lent. I just wasn't ready. It's too early, it's too soon, it's too fast. All those thoughts filled my mind. But despite my inability to connect with reality, the day is still upon us. Super, Shrove, Fat, Pancake Tuesday has passed and here we are, standing on the threshold of our journey to the cross.

Here we sit: together, nestled closely in this warm, dry, safe place, on a dark and rainy night, having just heard the words of the prophet Joel. ***"Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains."***

We leave that world out there and come in here to be calm and comforted, and yet we hear words of gloom and trembling. And are BOLDLY CONFRONTED with death and darkness, delivered a painful dose of reality: ***Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*** What a stark contrast from the political circus of Super Tuesday and the raucous of Mardi Gras. What a stark contrast from a culture that prefers to ignore death, and to dress up what cannot be concealed. We live in a world that would rather rush from Christmas Eve to Easter morning, without blinking an eye.

But we know, as Christians sitting here in this place that masquerades and music, pancakes and politics cannot wipe away or cover up the reality of this day.

As we begin preparing for this Lenten season, the harsh reality of death forces us to reconsider the meaning of life and death, apart from Christ and in Christ. A cross of ashes smudged on our forehead reminds us that we too will die, we cannot change that. But we can die ***in Christ***, whose death transforms our ending into a new beginning. And we can live ***in Christ***, whose love transforms our weeping into dancing.

### ***Out of the ashes, God brings new life!***

This week on the nightly news there was a story about a family whose house burned down while they were home. The family survived, but they lost most of their belongings.

It was devastating to watch as the house just disappeared. The fireman said even the brick on the house melted off. I kept thinking to myself: where do you even begin to rebuild? The mother they interviewed smiled as she said, "We're all ok. Our family is ok."

Then the camera cut to a shot of her digging through the ashes of her destroyed home and her smiling as she pulled out a photo album. She turned to the camera and said, "thank God I found some pictures, thank you God."

Out of what appeared to be nothing but dust, debris and ashes, that woman pulled out an album of memories. I was amazed at her excitement. Her entire house had just burned down and yet she found joy in

that one photo album. It connected her to the past and gave her hope for the future. A powerful image for Ash Wednesday.

***Out of the ashes, God brings new life!***

In tonight's first reading, the prophet Joel goes on to say, ***"Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God."***

This night, the beginning of the Lenten journey is a time for us to reclaim our identity as Christians, radical believers in God's amazing power to love, to heal, to forgive and to give new life. This season beckons us to return to the Lord our God, with all our heart, all our mind, all our body and all our strength. But this beckoning draws us into a desert, into a wilderness of self reflection, into a place that is often uncomfortable and frightening.

When I was in elementary school I loved to explore: inside, outside, home or school, it didn't matter where I was, I was always exploring. One day at school I decided I wanted to explore the nature trail behind our playground. I knew I wasn't supposed to go out there alone, but something compelled me to.

When my teacher Mrs. Horne was talking with a group of students I slipped out the side door of our kindergarten classroom and off I went. I remember thinking I was all grown up, walking the nature trail alone. I picked up rocks and bugs and kicked the dirt and before I knew it I was pretty deep into the woods behind my school. Then all of a sudden it wasn't so much fun being alone. I realized I couldn't see the building anymore. I was separated from everyone, all alone and I didn't know my way back.

I began to panic; tears welled up in my eyes as I envisioned being lost out there forever. I walked from tree to tree, looking for something familiar, something that would lead me back. But everything looked the same. Finally I sat down near a tree and waited, tears running down my face. Soon I heard a voice calling my name. My teacher had quickly noticed I was gone and called the school office. The principal sent the custodian out to look for me. When I heard my name I jumped up and started running toward the voice. When I saw our custodian Mr. John I ran and hugged him SO tight. You found me I said! He held my hand as we walked back to my classroom and I remember thinking, that was a neat adventure but I don't think I wanna do it again. I felt safe and warm back in my classroom with my teacher.

***The wilderness can be an uncomfortable and frightening place but it can also be a place of growth and discovery.***

Ash Wednesday shoves us into the wilderness and the wandering of Lent, opening our eyes to the reality of sin and death, opening our eyes to our humanity, our vulnerability and our fragility. Ash Wednesday forces us to explore the wilderness of our lives; to travel to those places inside of us that are deep, dark and painful; those places of fear, selfishness, anguish, emptiness and addiction; those places of sin, death and the devil and to linger there a while, realizing our ultimate dependence on God and God's grace.

Ash Wednesday, and the season of Lent beckons us to travel through the wilderness of our lives, through the ashes and debris, all the way to the cross and to resist the temptation to flee from the darkness.

This season calls us from our places of comfort to return to Lord to pray, to fast, to weep, to mourn, to seek forgiveness and to be healed. This season of radical transformation calls us to believe it is possible for God to breathe new life into the ashes of death. To believe it is possible for God to recreate our broken lives, bringing us through the wilderness into the light of the Resurrection.

*"Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."*

This night we hear a word that is counter to the culture, a word of hope and love. The Good News of God's Gospel says that not only do these crosses of ash remind us of our sin, of our fragile humanity and of our death. But ultimately they remind us that in our Baptism into Christ we belong to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We are children of the Living God, the one who willingly gave His own life so that we could live. The one who calls out to us in the wilderness, and waits with open arms when we come running; the one who will not leave us wandering, panicked, and alone, but will call us by name, love and forgive us. We belong to the One who brings new life out of the ashes of death.

This Lenten season, God is calling each of us saying, *"Return to me."* He isn't calling for us to dig into our pockets and dump our change into the offering plate, he's not interested in our money, He wants our heart. *Return to me with all your heart.* I pray this night that together we may have the strength to say, *"Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me. And that thou biddest me, to come to thee. Oh Lamb of God, I come, I come."*

Thanks be to God. Amen.