

March 9, 2011
Ash Wednesday
Matthew 6:1 – 6, 16 – 21

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"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

It really is a crash landing. Ash Wednesday. Since Nov. 28 of last year, the beginning of Advent, we've hopped from one cloud to the next, a veritable feast of religious parties; from anticipating Jesus' birth, celebrating it, announcing it to the world, his baptism, and a few days ago admiring him in glowing white clothes on a mountain top, chatting it up with Moses and Elijah. We've gone from white paraments to purple. With some Sundays of green in between. There's no fluff or nice stories attached to this day. The purpose is simple. We are here today to come face to face with our humanity, to see if we've got what it takes to follow Jesus. No pointing away from ourselves, and oohing and ahing over how cute the baby Jesus is, how bright that star is, some amazing miracle Jesus did. If you've got a compact with a mirror, get it

out. It's time to take a good long look at ourselves. It would be appropriate to paste a reflective patch on our bulletins, or put mirrors in the pews. That's the business of the day. To be honest with ourselves and with God.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not usually one of those "Woe is me, O God, worm that I am. We deserve nothing but punishment" kind of preachers. This is a stretch for me. If you haven't noticed by now, I'm all about God's grace and love and call to justice and righteousness. 366 days a year that's what I'm passionate about. So don't you know that I need to be here tonight. Being a theological optimistic is fine most days of the year, but this day, we've got to get real, be brutally honest about our faults, no skipping straight to God's grace to avoid the tough stuff. We've got to know if we're up to following Jesus when the going gets tough. We need to spend some time maturing our faith, dealing with our demons, becoming better disciples.

We arrive at this Ash Wednesday holy day in reverse. It doesn't come from where we've been. Advent, Christmas, Baptism, Epiphany, Transfiguration. We get to today by counting backward from Jesus' resurrection 40 days. Leaving out Sundays, because Lent or no Lent, every Sunday is a mini celebration of the resurrection. There's no 40 day marker in the gospels. Nothing that happened 40 days before Jesus' resurrection. Nope, these 40 days are wonderfully symbolic. I know you all could name some top 40s of the Bible. It rained on Noah for 40 days and 40 nights. Moses and the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness, between Egypt and the promised land. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. 40 is a symbolic number in the Bible. It says "a long time." It says "a complete time." It says "God's time."

The early church had a great plan with Lent. As the 3 year long new member's class was down to their last 40 days before getting their box of envelopes, before being baptized at the Easter vigil, they really buckled down. Not that a 3 year long membership class isn't serious enough already. But those last 40 days they really focused on the condition of their hearts, of their lives. They laid their souls bare for God. Was their motivation pure? Did they understand that the human condition was both full of potentially good and potentially evil thoughts and deeds? Were they willing to live their lives in a constant pattern of examining their souls, being honest about their sins, asking for God's forgiveness, and being changed by God's grace to use the gifts God had given them to make the world a better place? In time, it wasn't only the

catechumates, the about to be new members who participated in these 40 days of fasting and praying and almsgiving, it was the whole church. That's where we got Lent.

If on April 24 we are to come to this place and be blown away, surprised, filled with joy, to hear those words from the gospel that the tomb was found empty, and more importantly, if we are to have any sort of an understanding of who Jesus was, what he did and why, between the transfiguration and resurrection, then starting today, we've got to be brutally honest with ourselves, and concentrate as much as we can on what we hear each Sunday about Jesus' ministry, his response to the government and religious leaders' threats, and his refusal to compromise his faith. Fasting, praying, and almsgiving were the marks of the early church's Lent season. If you haven't already thought about it, today is a good day to decide how you can bring rhythm and meaning to your faith life these next 40 days. Fasting, praying, and giving to the poor are great ideas. You may well have some others. Simply participating in Sunday worship, in the Wednesday evening supper and discussion series, subscribing to a daily on-line devotion, reading an inspiring book. Whatever you do, this season of Lent is about turning our lives over to God in total honesty. In the words of today's Psalm, "Renew a right spirit within me O God. And cast me not away from your presence."

So we begin this 40 day season of Lent together tonight. I know many of you know the facts that I've shared. But some don't and it might make this service more meaningful. But all of us, whether we know the facts or not, start at the same place when it comes to our relationship with God, our desire to follow Jesus. We're here because we take it seriously. We mess up. We try hard not to repeat the same mistakes, but we do. So we're here to learn habits of faith that will make us more mature Christians. That will draw us closer to Jesus along the way. That will allow us to use more of the gifts God has given us. That will keep us honest with ourselves, instead of being hypocrites or self-destructive. And it takes a village, or a congregation. We need each other during Lent. Repentance is a funny thing. Like the seemingly contradictory 12 step mantra tells us about sobriety, you have to do it by yourself, but you can't do it alone. We need to have our foreheads or hands smudged together. And we need to pray our own prayers for our own struggles. And to know we sit beside strangers and loved ones whose struggles probably aren't too different from ours. And then participate in communion together, fed by the living Christ. It is good that we are here together this first day of Lent. May this season of Lent deepen our faith, as individuals and as a church family. Amen.