

Ash Wednesday 2024

Did you know... that the last time Valentine's Day was on Ash Wednesday was in 2018? It will happen again in 2029. Did you also know that the word Lent is in the word valentine?

I witnessed something Valentiny today that made my heart melt. I visited Bob Lephardt at Theda Care this morning. Nancy, his wife, was there... but getting ready to leave and play organ for the church she works for in Menasha for Ash Wednesday services. Upon saying goodbye, I found out they kiss each other 4 times every day. It was so cute. I was like, Jeranna and I should be doing something like that each day.

OK, back to Lent. Tonight, after an extended confession of sins, you will be invited to receive an Ash Cross on your forehead or hand accompanied with the words "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

What does that mean to you... that you are called dust? Dust is something that settles on our door frames or mantles. On the dash of our car. It collects in our couches or on our TV's. On our pets. It blows around outside. It's not a compliment by any means. It is easily wiped away with a wet cloth if you take time to dust. Dust seems insignificant and temporary. But if you recall in Genesis 2, the Lord formed man out of the dust in the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. When we take our last breath we will be dust again.

How does one respond to that... you are dust and to dust you shall return?

You could respond like one of the Pickle Ball Ladies who came into my office today who participated in Ashes to Go last year. They did walk through Ashes this year in my office. She responded with, "Amen!" after I traced the Ash Cross on her forehead. Amen means "It is true".

It is true... the Ash cross reminds us of the temporariness of life... that we are fragile... and that we will all die one day. It also reminds us that we are dead in our sin, "We are in bondage to sin and we cannot free ourselves." Hearing that we are dust should give us a

sense of urgency to return to God with all our heart. It should make us think about the time we have left on this earth and how we should go about living knowing that death is in our rear-view mirror.

This is where our scriptures come in today. Knowing that we are dust and to dust we shall return, what does God desire for us as we enter this season of Lent.

I have broken this out into 3 things that God desires for us: A meaningful fast, a broken heart, and a letting go of earthly rewards

A meaningful fast

In Isaiah 58, the prophet was calling out empty fasting or empty piety. The people would faithfully fast, but on their fast day, they would still oppress their workers, quarrel, and fight. Their fasting was a show for themselves and didn't result in love for the neighbor. Instead, the fast God chooses according to the prophet is to loose the bonds of injustice, to help the oppressed go free, share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless into your homes, cloth the naked, and to take care of your own kin. In other words, try When you do this your light shall shine before others. So any fasting we do, should always move from ritual into action. As James 2:17 says, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

A broken heart. The prerequisite to forgiveness is a broken heart. I remember how bad I felt as a kid when I got in trouble and sent to my room. I would cry and wait for my mom to come in and give me another chance.

Psalm 51 is a Psalm of David after he is confronted by the prophet Nathan for stealing Bathsheba as his wife and having her husband Uriah killed. David realizes his sin and repents. He prays that his sins are removed and that God creates in him a clean heart and a new and right spirit within him. But the part that gets me are verses 16-17. "For you take no delight in sacrifice, or I would give it. You are not pleased with burnt offerings. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a troubled spirit; a troubled and broken heart, O God, you will not despise."

When we have a broken heart over things we have done or left undone, God is quick to forgive. On the cross, Jesus takes on our sin and sets us free. To the repentant thief on the cross in Luke 23:42 when he says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" Jesus responds, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Letting go of earthly rewards. Finally, in our Gospel, Jesus is calling out spiritual practices that are for show or for public reward. Jesus says when you give, or pray, or fast don't do it so others see how wonderful you are. But to do those things in secret, or when no one is watching. Our Father who sees in secret will reward you.

May you have a blessed Lent and choose one discipline that draws you out of yourself and open to others who may be in need or hurting.