

February 18, 2015, Ash Wednesday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17

Ashes & Snow

It's a harsh night, weather-wise. The temperature wants to tell us otherwise, but winter is nearing its end. A friend of mine dreads this time of the season, when the snow has settled into hardened heaps that stick around with a gritty determination, their gray surface less a miracle of the atmosphere than an ugly reminder of what we put in it, with what we dirty it. My friend says that these gray piles are "the visible announcement of all the pollution that we pump into the air." He says, "All that pollution is actually always there, but now we can't help but see it: all laid out in blotches at the edges of the road."

I protested, "It can't all be pollution. Some of it must be just dirt, the earth, the ground." My friend replied, "Whatever you need to tell yourself . . ."

Today, Ash Wednesday, we keep time with this final phase of the winter season, even as we begin another season, the church season of Lent. Worship tonight is solemn, and what we do and say in it can seem chilling. We'll affix ashy blotches on the edges of our faces, a rite of worship that announces two truths about what it means to be human.

Like the ashy heaps of snow and the assertion of my friend, the ashes on our foreheads acknowledge pollution, our pollution. How harsh it sounds when it is put like that: our human pollution. Perhaps we have grown inured to the churchy word for it, which is sin. But just as surely as our environment suffers from the abuse we heap upon it, so humans suffer from abuse—our own abuse, and the abuse of others.

Later in the service, as a group, we'll confess the ways that we do this, the ways we sin. As we confess our sin as a group, so also we'll describe sin in groups, in general categories or types of sin: unfaithfulness, pride, envy, hypocrisy, apathy. Each one of us could fill in more specific details, ways we have personalized a particular sin, allowed it to pollute our lives.

In all the harshness of that language, it's important, so very important also to announce that this confession of sin does not say we are all dirty or bad. Nor does this confession mean that church is all about the recitation of human vices. Nor does this confession mean that God is just waiting to punish us once we finally divulge what we've done. No. No. And no. Confession of sin acknowledges, honestly, publically, and communally, that there are things we have done wrong. It is as simple, and as profound as that. Like the pollution in the air that we see in the piles of snow, sin is a part of our lives, whether we see it all the time or not. To wear ashes on one's head is to admit that, to tell yourself, and to tell the world that, to be honest about sin. It is part of being human.

So also is dust. The ashes are traced on our foreheads together with an announcement: "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." That, too, can sound harsh, but it's not so much a put down as an acknowledgement of another truth: we are made of matter; molecules, atoms—or in the vocabulary of the church, we are dust. As it says in the creation account of Genesis 2, "the Lord God formed the human out of the dust of the ground." We do not need to read that literally to acknowledge its simple and profound truth: our bodies are composed of particles—maybe not dust, but not too many elements away from it. And after we die, our bodies will return to it, become part of the dust, the earth, again. To wear ashes on one's head is to tell yourself that, and to tell the world that, to be honest about death. It is part of being human.

Ash Wednesday acknowledges both of these truths: the truth of human frailty, and the truth of human mortality. Like winter, looking on to its death, on Ash Wednesday we look on to

the death that is sin and the death that will come to our bodies.

But as Christians we do not shiver at these thoughts. We are not afraid to face these truths. We acknowledge them today, and every day that we gather as a church, for we have yet other truths. Among them:

That God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; that God is eager to forgive, that forgiveness is what God wants to do and can and will do, making us pure as snow; that God has breathed into our dust-formed bodies the breath of life, God's own Spirit; that God can and will renew this right Spirit within us, and restore us, accomplishing in us the work of salvation.

Ash Wednesday is about these these truths, too, these profound truths about God, and what God does in the community that gathers in his name.

Some of you know Reuben Erickson, a homebound member of our congregation, passed away Monday night. He was 96 years old. I am remembering a visit that I had with Reuben last year. It was Ash Wednesday, in fact. I don't remember the weather on Ash Wednesday last year, but I do remember feeling grey that day, feeling gray about the world, and grey about myself...

I didn't know Reuben all that well, it was only the second time I had been up to see him. He was a quiet man, not one to complain, courteous, with a solemn air about him. He said that day, when I asked how he was, "as well as he could be, considering his age, but, to be honest, he had not been feeling that great that day, the past couple days, maybe his medicine was off." We visited politely for a bit. I asked about his house, his neighborhood, his past. He told me about his beloved wife of 62 years, how she was buried in the cemetery across the street. Our conversation was coming to a close, I noted it was Ash Wednesday, which he well knew. I said I did have ashes with me, would he like to participate in that rite? Yes, he would. We prayed, and I traced the sign of the cross on his forehead: "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." His skin was soft, fine as ashes, beneath his snow-white hair. We shared holy communion.

Reuben walked me to the door, and he said what I felt, too, "This was the best part of my day." To be invited into Lent, to wear an ashen cross, is to enter into that, into a time of clarifying serenity, into a deepened trust in the profound grace of God, and into the hope of our final season, with Reuben and all the saints with God.