

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is a day when we are stopped dead in our tracks.

And the pun is definitely intended.

We don't wear these ashes to demonstrate our piety, but to recognize our mortality.

And to remind anyone who might take a look at these black smudges on our foreheads that they too are mortal.

Today we stop dead in our tracks so that we can remember where we've come from.

Our year started with Advent, the weeks before Christmas, when we prepare to welcome the baby, but also, more importantly, to look forward to the time when all things will be brought to a conclusion.

That conclusion is the day when God makes all things new, this earth, the heavens and each and everyone of us.

And where we've been since then is to help get us ready for that day.

Because the question posed to everyone is this: when God's kingdom does arrive, is it a place where I want to be?

It's like the bishop who dies and goes to heaven.

He gets off the bus and asks St Peter where the next meeting is; because that's what Bishops do — they go to meetings!

St. Peter says with a warm smile: "My son, there's no meetings in heaven!"

And the Bishop promptly jumps on the bus and goes straight to hell,
where they have meetings all the time!

But don't laugh at the bishop!

Our culture tries every day to turn God's kingdom into nothing more
than a bigger and better Disneyland with no lines, or an eternal golf
course or endless movies in free theaters.

But Jesus tells us God's kingdom is more like a banquet - with all kinds
of folks rubbing elbows and sharing stories.

And the most honored guests are the least, the lost and the left behind.

Since Christmas, we have spent a great deal of time learning from Jesus
about this odd kingdom.

We have listened in as Jesus turns the whole world on its head,
exchanging our love for the rich and famous for God's love for the down
and out.

Putting a red light in the face of our justified angers and resentments.

Turning a green light on the love of enemies and the surrender of self.

All of which comes to a head as the transfigured Jesus, shining like the
sun, once again picks up the pace on that dusty road on his way to
Calvary, where glory and pain meet, where suffering and redemption
embrace.

This journey from Advent to Christmas to Epiphany to the Transfiguration
to today is no accident.

We need it!

We need it because we somehow, against all odds, need to get used to God's strange kingdom because, let's face it, if you're like me, we are slow learners when it comes to the ways of God.

The ways of God show themselves in the old story of how heaven and hell are so much alike, and yet so very different.

In hell, everyone has 3 foot long chopsticks, and they are starving because they can't feed themselves - the sticks are too long!

In heaven, everyone has 3 foot chopsticks too, but everyone is well fed and happy, because in heaven, they feed each other!

Ash Wednesday is sort of a stop sign on our journey whose purpose is to remind us not only of our mortality, but as a time to sit down for a moment, to take a breath, to check-in.

A time to ask just how am I doing in the "turn the other cheek department?"

How goes my resentments and justified angers?

What's the status of my love affair with looking down my nose at this gal or that guy.

In short, am I a little better this year than last at letting **others** feed me, or am I most comfortable still simply feeding **myself**?

Lent marks a waypoint in our journey of moving from tight to light.

You know what that's like.

When we get on our high horse or feel the need to retaliate or stay mad, teeth are clenched, fists are formed and stomachs churn.

We feel tight.

But Jesus calls us to be light.

To surrender whatever makes us want to fight, whether it's money or pride or ego or fear.

And once we do, stomachs calm down, smiles replace grinding teeth, and fists become hands — open for the shaking.

This is the journey of our faith.

This is our destiny.

This is our hope.

+amen