

Revisiting Ashes and Hope

Each year, Christians gather on Ash Wednesday to begin the holy season of Lent. Our Book of Common Prayer offers only one Ash Wednesday service. There are no choices to be made between Rite One and Rite Two, no approved variations to soften Ash Wednesday's stark assertions. Our prayer book reminds us that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. Not "may" or "might" – *shall*. No matter how long we live or how much we accomplish or experience in this life, each of us will inevitably return to the dust from which we were made. Ash Wednesday calls us to remember that inescapable truth.

Just as our prayer book returns to the same worship service each year, we read the same passages from Scripture every Ash Wednesday. There's a bit more variation here. The celebrant can choose between passages from the Book of Joel or the Book of Isaiah. We can read Psalm 103 in whole or in part. Still, St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians urges us each year to be reconciled to God. And each year, Jesus reminds us not to show off our faithfulness and generosity to earn the praise of others. Instead, we are to give, pray, and fast in secret, where our Father who sees in secret will reward us. And our goal should be not to store up transitory treasures on Earth, but eternal treasures in heaven. Because, as Jesus reminds us, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Some Biblical commentators point out a seeming inconsistency in our Ash Wednesday worship. Despite Jesus's admonition not to parade our piety, our liturgy instructs us to adorn our foreheads with ash, fall to our knees, and confess our sins aloud, in unison, and at some length, not only to our Father, but "to one another and to the whole communion of saints in heaven and on earth." Isn't that exactly what Jesus told us not to do? Well, no, it's not, but some explanation might be in order.

As our prayer book tells us, Christianity's Lenten practices didn't emerge until after Jesus's Resurrection and Ascension. Although some kind of preparation and fasting for the annual Easter festival has likely been practiced since the time of the apostles, our Lenten observance wasn't formalized until the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. We fast for forty days – though our practices in the West have grown considerably more lenient than those of our Eastern Orthodox cousins – to imitate Jesus's fasting in the wilderness before he began his public ministry. We encourage almsgiving and other acts of charity in recognition of Jesus's special concern for the poor. We confess our sins and pray together because Lent is not only a time for candidates to prepare for baptism and confirmation. It's also a time – to quote our liturgy – for “notorious sinners” who have been separated from the congregation to prepare by repentance and forgiveness for reconciliation to the fellowship of the Church. Lent isn't just a time to deal with our individual salvation. It's a time to renew and strengthen our connection to one another in the body of Christ. And that's why we need to go through Lent together.

One of the unfortunate aspects of our individualistic American culture is that we tend to assume that sin, repentance, and salvation are personal matters. They certainly can be – we're all capable of making choices that break God's heart. But human sinfulness isn't exclusively individual. There are larger problems in this world that are created by our combined sinfulness, problems like racism, war, environmental degradation, and poverty. No one of us is responsible for any of them, and all of us contribute to them. As Richard Rohr observed in his 2020 homily, “Sin is Collective and Salvation is Collective,” “We're all cooperative in the stupidity and evil of human history. No one can stand up and say, ‘I didn't do anything wrong.’ As Paul says so clearly: ‘All have sinned’ (Romans 3:23), so we all bear the burden of sin. It's a waste of God's time—and our own—to try to prove who is more worthy, more holy, more blameless.” That's

why we confess our sins together, and why our hope of redemption is strengthened when we seek it in community.

Before we go much further, we need to take a moment to consider what we mean when we talk about “sin.” The Episcopal tradition defines sin as a stain, an offense, or a missing of the mark. That sounds pretty mild, but even the mention of sin can make people squirm. In his 2021 sermon, “Regarding Sin,” Episcopal priest Joshua Bowron laments that, for many of us, the language of sin has been obscured; even the concept has been lost. Part of us wishes we could just leave the whole idea of sin behind, but we can’t discard sin as some antiquated notion that has no relevance in our postmodern world. One look at the mess we’ve made is all it takes to confirm that sin is still highly active in our individual and common lives. If the word “sin” makes your eyes glaze over, however, Bowron suggests that the idea of sin may be better understood as isolation and damage. When we isolate ourselves or one another, we diminish our humanity and weaken our community. When we damage ourselves or one another, we mar the wholeness and health that are our natural, God-given state. We can be restored, but not without help from God and our community. That’s why reconciliation to God and one another is such an important element of our Lenten practices. Just as our confession of sin is more powerful when we make it together, our prayers for healing and reconciliation go deeper when we speak them as one.

Before we entirely eliminate the word “sin” from our spiritual vocabulary, however, it’s worth considering Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor’s perspective. In her book *Speaking of Sin*, Brown Taylor asks, “How can we speak of sin if we have forsaken the language that best describes it?” Rather than cringing from that ugly word or blunting its force with euphemisms, Brown Taylor insists that we should call sin exactly what it is. Sin, she argues, “is our only hope, because the recognition that something is wrong is the first step toward setting it right again.

There is no help for those who admit no need of help. There is no repair for those who insist that nothing is broken. And there is no hope of transformation for a world whose inhabitants accept that it is sadly but irreversibly wrecked.” If we want to ask God for forgiveness and redemption, honesty compels us to confess first that we have sinned.

You won’t often hear me preach about sin. Like a lot of Episcopal clergy, I don’t much care for the way some of our colleagues from other denominations use sin as a stick to beat their congregants into terror of eternal damnation. Believing in a loving and forgiving God, I prefer to focus on the ways that Jesus puts us on the road to heaven, rather than pointing in horrified judgment at behaviors that can drive us to the gates of hell. A sinner myself, I’m in no position to condemn anyone else. Still, I agree with Brown Taylor that our hope lies in admitting that our actions and choices do tremendous damage when, to quote our catechism, we seek our own will instead of the will of God. Sin is destructive; honest confession, repentance, and amendment of life are healing and redemptive. Ash Wednesday and Lent give us a precious opportunity every year to come clean with God and each other. Embarrassing as it may be, admitting that we’ve sinned is the first step toward forgiveness and reconciliation.

Jesus reminds us that building up treasure on earth is a fruitless exercise. Even if rust, moths, and thieves don’t devour whatever we manage to scrape together, we enter this world empty handed and leave it the same way. The greatest treasure for which we can hope is a loving relationship with the God who will welcome us into the Kingdom of Heaven when our race is run. To strengthen that relationship, we need to revisit and wrestle with the idea of sin during Lent each year. It may not be entirely pleasant or comfortable. That’s okay, because admitting that we’ve sinned – as everyone does – and opening our hearts to repentance is how we regain our hope of redemption. And where our hope of heaven is, there will our hearts be also. *Amen.*