

Ash Wednesday (Matthew 6: 1-6., 16-21)

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN A FOREST DECIMATED BY FIRE? I REMEMBER YEARS AGO TRAVELING IN THE BLACK HILLS AFTER THE BATTLE CREEK FIRE THAT BURNED ROUGHLY 13,000 ACRES. EVERYTHING WAS BLACK AND BARREN. IT WAS A STARK REMINDER THAT EVERYTHING BURNS. BURNING IS SIMPLY THE PROCESS OF SOMETHING FALLING APART. IT IS ENERGY BEING RELEASED AS THE MOLECULAR BONDS ARE BROKEN AND WHAT WAS ONCE A BEAUTIFUL PIECE OF WOOD IS REDUCED TO A PILE OF BLACK AND GREY ASH.

EVERYTHING FALLS APART. CARS BREAK DOWN. PAINT FLAKES OFF. FLOWERS WILT AND TURN BRITTLE. SKIN WRINKLES, HEARTS FAIL, FLESH DECOMPOSES.

HOPES AND DREAMS BURN, TOO. JOBS ARE LOST. CHILDREN REBEL. FAMILIES BREAK APART. CHURCHES SPLIT. IN THE END, IT ALL TURNS BACK TO ASHES.

EVERYONE HAS ASHES. EVERYONE HAS SOMETHING THAT HAS FALLEN APART IN LIFE. AND NOW IT LIES THERE...OUR SINS, FEARS, DISAPPOINTMENTS, AND FAILURES...IN A PILE OF ASHES.

WHAT DOES YOUR PILE LOOK LIKE TONIGHT?

USUALLY WE COME TO CHURCH WITH OUR BEST FACES ON. WE COME WITH SMILES AND LAUGHTER, EVEN IF WE DON'T FEEL LIKE IT. BUT NOT TONIGHT. TONIGHT WE COME TO DO SOMETHING VERY SIGNIFICANT. WE HAVE COME TO BE MARKED WITH ASHES. WE DISPLAY ON THE OUTSIDE WHAT WE FEEL LIKE ON THE INSIDE.

WE ARE MARKED TONIGHT FOR A SPECIAL REASON. TONIGHT MARKS THE BEGINNING OF A JOURNEY THAT WE WILL TAKE TOGETHER. IT IS A JOURNEY THAT MOST OF US HAVE TRAVELED BEFORE. WE KNOW THE DESTINATION. IT IS RESURRECTION. WE KNOW THE END OF THE STORY. IT IS JOY AND VICTORY. AND YET, WE MUST TAKE THIS JOURNEY EACH YEAR. FOR THE NEXT 40 DAYS WE WILL JOURNEY TOGETHER...MARKED BY ASHES.

LENT IS AN INNER JOURNEY AS WE WILL LOOK DEEP WITHIN AND ASK THE SPIRIT TO SHOW US PLACES THAT NEED TO BE CLEANED AND HEALED IN OUR SOULS. LENT IS A CLEANING OF THE SOUL AS WE LISTEN TO WHAT GOD WANTS TO TELL US.

ASHES REMIND US THAT EVERYTHING BURNS. THEY REMIND US OF OUR MORTALITY. WHEN I PLACED THE ASHES ON YOUR FOREHEAD I SPOKE THE FAMILIAR WORDS, "REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE DUST, AND TO DUST YOU SHALL RETURN." IT IS GOOD FOR US TO REMEMBER HOW FRAIL LIFE IS. AS MUCH AS WE HATE TO ADMIT IT, ONE DAY EACH OF US WILL BE REDUCED TO DUST. OUR FLESH WILL FAIL. THROUGH THESE ASHES WE ARE REMINDED THAT LIFE IS A GIFT FROM GOD, NOT TO BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED.

THESE ASHES ALSO REMIND US OF THE MESSINESS OF LIFE. NO MATTER HOW HARD WE TRY, OR HOW MUCH WE PRETEND, WE MESS UP, WE SIN. ON AN EVENING LIKE THIS, WE COME TOGETHER TO BE HUMBLLED BY OUR SIN. LIKE THE PROPHETS OF OLD, WE ARE CALLED TO REPENT. WE ARE CALLED OUT ON THE CARPET AND WE ADMIT LIFE IS MESSY AND WE ARE IMPERFECT AND WE ARE POWERLESS TO MAKE OURSELVES CLEAN.

LENT CALLS US TO SLOW DOWN, PURPOSEFULLY BRINGING OURSELVES INTO THE WILDERNESS, TO JOIN JESUS AS HE SPENT 40 DAYS IN THE DESERT AND THEN WAS TEMPTED BY SATAN. IT IS A TIME TO LET GOD SEARCH OUR HEARTS WITH A MICROSCOPE TO SEE WHAT NEEDS TO BE CLEANED OUT.

THESE ASHES BREAK US DOWN, AND CALL US TO PRAYER. WITH SOOT ON OUR FACES WE ARE HUMBLLED AND REDUCED TO THE PILE OF ASHES THAT WE ARE.

WE ARE HUMBLLED, BUT WE ARE ALSO ENCOURAGED. WE ARE ENCOURAGED BECAUSE THESE ASHES HAVE A SECOND MEANING. NOT ONLY ARE THEY THE REMAINS OF OUR BURNT UP LIVES, THEY ARE ALSO ASHES OF REBIRTH.

DID YOU KNOW THAT SOAP IS THE COMBINATION OF ASH AND FAT? CENTURIES AGO, PEOPLE WOULD SAVE THE ASHES FROM THEIR FIRES AND SAVE THE GREASE DRIPPINGS FROM THEIR COOKING, AND THEN COMBINE THEM TO MAKE SOAP.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT IS ON YOUR FOREHEAD RIGHT NOW? IT IS A COMBINATION OF THE ASHES FROM BURNT PALM BRANCHES COMBINED WITH OLIVE OIL. OIL IS FAT. ASHES AND FAT. YOU HAVE SOAP ON YOUR FOREHEAD.

REMEMBER OIL WAS USED WHEN YOU WERE BAPTIZED, TO BE THE SIGN OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN YOUR LIFE. ISN'T THAT JUST LIKE GOD? THE BLACK SMUDGE THAT REPRESENTS OUR SIN AND DISGRACE IS THE VERY SAME THING THAT REPRESENTS THE CLEANSING POWER OF JESUS AT WORK IN OUR LIVES.

THE JOURNEY TO EASTER IS NOT A MOURNFUL DENIAL OF OUR HUMANITY. LENT EMBRACES OUR HUMANITY....OUR DEEPEST FEARS, OUR DOUBTS, OUR SINS, OUR GRIEF, OUR PAIN. LENT IS ABOUT BEING FULLY HUMAN AND KNOWING GOD'S PRESENCE IN THE SOUL SEARCHING...IN THE REPENTENCE.

I AM A TREE LOVER...ALL TREES. DID YOU KNOW THERE ARE CERTAIN KINDS OF TREES THAT NEED FIRE IN ORDER TO REPRODUCE? THEIR SEED PODS WILL ONLY OPEN UNDER EXTREME HEAT. SO, PERIODICALLY, BY GOD'S DESIGN, LIGHTNING WILL STRIKE A DEAD TREE, IT WILL CATCH ON FIRE, AND A DEVASTATING FIRE WILL SWEEP THROUGH THE FOREST AND LEAVE NOTHING BUT ASHES IN ITS WAKE. BUT THEN, IN THE DARK SOIL OF RUIN, NEW LIFE BEGINS. A GREEN SHOOT FORCES ITS WAY UP INTO THE SUNSHINE AND THE FOREST IS REBORN.

MY PRAYER FOR EACH OF EACH OF US IS THAT THESE ASHES WE BEAR TONIGHT WILL ALLOW US TO LET THE FIRE OF GOD'S SPIRIT BURN AWAY THE SIN IN OUR LIVES SO THAT THE WATER OF GOD'S SPIRIT WILL WASH US FRESH AND NEW AS WE WALK TOWARD THE DAY OF RESURRECTION. AMEN.