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Ash Wednesday

Attending Your Own Funeral
Hebrews 12:1-3, 14

The season of Lent has a complex tradition of prayer, penitence, self-denial, fasting and almsgiving...during the forty days before Easter—forty days, if you don't count the Sundays. The forty days are associated with the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness after his baptism, which will be our text for Sunday. The term "forty days" in biblical language means more nearly "for quite a while," just as it does in the story of Moses going up on Mt. Sinai for "forty days and forty nights," or as in the Noah story of it raining for "forty days."

And Jesus' going out into the wilderness for "forty days" is closely related to the history of the Hebrew people wandering in the wilderness for "forty years," which likewise was meant to convey something like "for quite a few years."

Jesus' time alone in the desert was a time of reflection, temptation, and testing. So, our forty days "journey" through the season of Lent is also to be a time of reflection and doing things that help us evaluate how we are living our lives—how well we are doing with this thing called life.

Fat Tuesday, Shrove Tuesday or Pancake Tuesday, is the day before Ash Wednesday. Shrove is the past tense of the English verb *shrive*, which means to obtain absolution through confession and doing penance. The "Fat or Pancake" part of Tuesday came about by the tradition of using up the rich foodstuff in the house, like eggs, milk, sugar, and grease before beginning a season of liturgical fasting—eating plainer foods.

Like I said, Lent (a word taken from the Dutch *lente* which means Spring) has a complex background.

The "Ashes" part comes from the biblical tradition of expressing regret and sorrow for something ill done. In biblical times, to move into a season of penance, a person might dress in "sack cloth and ashes." Do you remember what Job said after giving God quite a lengthy piece of his mind, which was followed by God asking question after question exposing Job's arrogance and tunnel

vision of life? Job said, “Up to now, I have known you, God, only by the report of others. Now, I have seen you with my own eyes. Therefore I yield, repenting in dust and ashes.”

Such repenting in “dust and ashes” reminds us of our humanity. It reminds us that we are not God and that our lives on earth are limited. Hence the saying we use: *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*

It is easy for us to get so entangled in traditions that the process of being reflective is lost...or else it feels so convoluted that we do nothing and fail to take advantage of a special season in the church year.

The process of praying for a special need in the world makes our hearts soft for that need. The process of considering our faults—our sins—makes us more conscious of our many other shortcomings—our sins against God and others. The process of our giving alms—our giving part of our financial resources to the church or a worthy charity—makes us more sensitive to the important needs around us, more appreciative of what we have, and how vitally we are linked with the rest of the world. The rest of the world needs us and we need others and the rest of the world.

For some years, I’ve particularly appreciated the Revised English Version of the twelfth chapter of letter to the Hebrews:

...we too must throw off every encumbrance and the sin that all too readily restricts us, and run with resolution the race which lies ahead of us, our eyes fixed on Jesus...

The whole idea of the season of Lent is to get rid of those things that restrict us or weigh us down and run the race before us unhindered. Like Paul did on many occasions, the writer of this letter uses the analogy of the Greek Olympic runner to the way we live life. If something is holding you back, slowing you down, causing you to not do your best, turn it loose.

The process of turning something loose is to first put yourself in a mental, emotional, or spiritual position so that you can see things more clearly—you can see things as they are. That is the purpose of a disciplined quiet time; it is the purpose of meditation, Yoga, reading scripture devotionally, taking a quiet walk, going for a run, sitting quietly by yourself in a pleasant location. You see things in a different light. You become more aware of the world around you. You see

people with needs in a different light. You encounter God firsthand, rather than knowing of God only the conversations of others.

In some ways, an Ash Wednesday service can be like attending your own funeral. You have a chance to reflect on your limited time in life. *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.* At funerals, we remember the life of the deceased...the things they stood for, contributions made to life, their accomplishments...and we cast them across the backdrop of the larger elements of life.

How do we want to be remembered? How would we want our friends to remember us...our community, our children, grandchildren to remember us? "She was a kind person." "He was always doing something for others." "She made such a big difference in the life of this community." "The world will surely miss him."

That is the reason the words of this letter can be important during this Lent. They call you to evaluate the way you are running this race called life. "With everyone of importance cheering us on (this great cloud of witnesses), we, too, must throw off every encumbrance and the sin that all too readily restricts us, and run with resolution the race which lies ahead of us, our eyes fixed on Jesus..."

Prayer

Your words to us, Lord, are not ones to create guilt or remind us of our many shortcomings. Your words are always ones that call us to follow, trust, be light, be salt, live in hope. Help us move beyond our tendency to focus on our past so that we might be fully alive and fully human in the present. In the name of Christ we pray. AMEN.

Hebrews 12:1-3, 14 (REV)

With this great cloud of witnesses around us, therefore, we too must throw off every encumbrance and the sin that all too readily restricts us, and run with resolution the race which lies ahead of us, our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the sake of the joy that lay ahead of him, he endured the cross, ignoring its disgrace, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Think of him who submitted to such opposition from sinners: that will help you not lose heart and grow faint...

...Aim at peace with everyone and a holy life, for without that no one will see the Lord.