

The Most Uncomfortable Day of the Year

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the Asbury
United Methodist Church on Ash Wednesday, February 10, 2016]

I

Ash Wednesday is the most uncomfortable day of the year for Christians.

We much prefer Christmas, with its poinsettias,
Christmas carols,
and its image of the baby in the manger.

We prefer Easter, with the empty tomb and the risen Lord celebrated with lilies and
alleluias.

We probably even prefer Pentecost—
although those tongues of fire can be off-putting!

Ash Wednesday is another matter.

Ash Wednesday is a darker day, because it focuses on things we are not
comfortable with.

One pastor wrote about the time he was startled almost speechless when he found
himself placing ashes in the shape of a cross on the forehead of his three-year-old
daughter.

“I choked on the words, ‘Remember you are dust and to dust you shall
return.’ Never had my mortality been quite so real to me.”

Why are we so uncomfortable with this day and the ritual of ashes that is part of it?

II

Well, for one thing Ash Wednesday confronts us with our own mortality.

In fact, you could say it rubs our faces in it, or vice versa.

We are all subject to the reality of death.

As the poet has written, “With regards to death, every person is an unfortified city.”

But it’s not just death as a biological process,
but the death we bring on ourselves when we forget
that we are created in the image of God.

Ash Wednesday confronts us with the stark reality of sin.

“For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” writes St. Paul in the Book of Romans.

As the Psalmist puts it:

*For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight.* (Psalm 51:3-4)

On Ash Wednesday we are forced to view our capabilities realistically.

Left to ourselves, we can no more give up our self-will and our pretending to self-sufficiency than we can avoid death.

There are countless moments in each of our lives when we have eaten of the fruit of the forbidden tree,

demanded sovereignty that belongs only to God,
refused to be *who* and *whose* we were created to be.

We have cherished things more than relationships,
and failed to love as we have been loved.

In all such moments death has already cast its long shadow over us and over those
whom we have hurt.

Ash Wednesday confronts us with how inadequate we are when left to our own
devices.

The ashes remind us that we are fallen, and we can't get up on our own.

We need God's help.

We need God's forgiveness and God's grace.

We need God's love.

III

Furthermore, Ash Wednesday leaves us uncomfortable because at its heart it is a
call to repentance.

The point of the day is to make us uncomfortable not with God,
but with our sin.

To repent has nothing to do with beating ourselves up or wallowing in self-pity.

In the New Testament, the word "repent" simply means **to turn around**—
to turn our backs on sin and death and embrace the life God offers.

In repentance we answer God's call to become who God created us to be.

We need only be human, a simple matter of being in relationship with God and with other human beings.

As St. Paul writes:

For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

This day,
 the first of the 40 days of Lent,
 is ultimately uncomfortable only if we neglect to place it in the whole
 of our faith,
 the whole of the Gospel.

Repent—turn away from sin and embrace the One who offers us life,

As uncomfortable as Ash Wednesday is,
 how can we begin the journey of Lent without it?

IV

Death,
 sinfulness,
 repentance—
 these are the things the ashes symbolize for us.

Ash Wednesday reminds us first that we are dust,
 and to dust we will return.

Life is fleeting.

Time is short.

*Behold, now is the acceptable time;
 behold, now is the day of salvation!*

Ash Wednesday forces us to ask ourselves,
how would we live if we knew that our days were numbered?

Would we be more kind?

More loving?

More tolerant?

Would we be more accepting of those who are different—
whether that difference is racial,
social,
religious,
ethnic,
or in terms of gender identity or lifestyle?

Would we treat our friends differently?

Our enemies?

Would we make more time for our families?

Would we say, “I’m sorry” to the people that we’ve hurt?

Would we be more mindful of suffering in the world?

Would we want to share a little bit more of what we have with those who
have nothing?

What about you?

What would you do?

How would you live?

What kinds of things would you include on your *bucket list*?

On an episode of *The Simpsons* that well-known theologian Homer Simpson is told by his doctor that he has only a few days to live.

He is understandably frightened,
but very soon after this dire pronouncement,
he shows remarkable fortitude.

Homer makes a list of all the things that he would like to do before he dies,
and the list is full of things like ride in a blimp and tell off his boss.

But the list also contains items like making amends with the neighbor he's
always borrowing things from but never returning.

Homer also realizes that not only has he not been a model neighbor,
but also not the best father to his children.

So, he spends quality time with Bart,
and he listens to Lisa play the saxophone one last time..
instead of telling her to stop all that racket.

This all might seem very trivial,
especially since *The Simpsons* is a cartoon show.

But I think there's truth to the notion that when we come face to face with the
temporary nature of life and the certainty of death,
we immediately wonder if we've used this gift of life as God intended.

We think of our sinfulness, and we know immediately that we have work to do
before we die.

V

This, brothers and sisters, is the hope that is smeared in ashes on our foreheads—
 that there is more grace in God than there is sin in us,
 and that God's love has reached through our sinfulness,
 through the grim shadow of death,
 to the dust and the ashes of human life.

We may be dust,
 but dust that we are,
 we are loved.

We are accounted dead...
 and yet terrifically alive.

We have nothing,
 and yet by God's grace we have everything.

So, on this most uncomfortable day of the year,
 as you come forward to receive the ashes on your forehead,
 and as you partake of the Bread and the Cup,
 know that nothing in this world,
 not even your sinfulness,
 not even death,
 can separate you from the love of God
 in Jesus Christ our Lord.

As Walter Brueggemann writes:

*On this Wednesday, we submit our ashen way to you—
 your Easter parade of newness.*

*Before the sun sets, take our Wednesday and Easter us,
 Easter us to joy and energy and courage and freedom;
 Easter us that we may be fearless for your truth.*

Come here and Easter our Wednesday with

mercy and justice and peace and generosity.

We pray as we wait for the Risen One who comes soon.

Amen.

Sources:

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