

You all know this is Ash Wednesday, the first day of the season of Lent. In the early days of the church a two-day period of fasting and preparation preceded Easter; by the 4th Century this period of preparation had been set at 40 days, echoing the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness in prayer and preparation for His public ministry. You also know Jesus went apart to be strengthened, to become better attuned to the divine frequency, to be inSpired—to become better focused and prepared for his life of obedience and ministry. To become more awake and alive and committed to His upcoming God-assignment. He got in touch with who He was, what He was here for, Who was in charge of His life—and how He, the Son, would connect with the will of God the Father and with the power of God the Holy Spirit.

(Not a bad goal for each of us this Lent: to spend intentional time apart to become more awake and alive to who we are and what we are here for; to connect with the will of God the Father and with the power of God the Spirit.)

Ashes are, of course, the symbol for this first day of Lent. They have widely marked this day in the Church since the 10th Century. In the Old Testament ashes represented mortality (death!) and penitence—being broken-hearted about our disobedience before God. Later on this evening you will be welcome to come forward to receive the ashes on your forehead—in the sign of the cross—and you may have noticed that this sign in ashes mirrors a similar sign made with water on your forehead at the time of your baptism. After the death and Resurrection of Jesus, baptism reminds us of our death (death by drowning) to our original human nature and the new life into which Christ invites us.

The risk with this ritual of receiving the ashes, or any ritual, is that over time it may become empty of significance, a mere “going thru the motions.” I’m so glad each of you is here for this Service—here to fill this ancient ritual with meaning by your participation, your obedience, your lives. (Ritual itself is not the problem—only our failing to fill it with meaning.)

Think about ashes. Black, bleak, colorless—without shape, form, energy. A reminder of something greater. To the people in former times ashes were a reminder of many things—say, of a victorious army which comes in and loots and burns your city, your home. So much was once there, and only the ashes are left.

I may be typical of people in our age: my main contact with ashes has been thru a fire in the fireplace, or around a campfire. The image of these ashes is not traumatic, instead rather pleasant—but the ashes themselves tell a story. Once there had been trees alive, giving shade and life to birds, full of sap and vitality and leaves and energy—all turned to black, inert ashes. Ashes can’t even be burned; worthless reminders of something that was alive before.

Some might ask, “isn’t this talk of ashes a bit melodramatic, a bit morose?” Here we are gathered for a nice kickoff to the Lenten season—and ashes? But I don’t think most of you would ask that at all. David did not. Those of you taking seriously the life of faith know there is nothing casual or easy about living the new life in Christ, about being transformed, about choosing each day, each moment to hand your life over to the living God—no strings attached. (In fact, it’s those strings we need to see turned into

ashes: those strings we keep clinging to even as we know full well we have offered our selves, our lives, our fortunes, our futures, into the care of the living God.)

According to tradition David was the author of Psalm 51, which we just heard. He knew what was at stake; he knew “ashes” were called for. “Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love! Blot out my transgressions, according to Your abundant mercy!” Some in today’s culture, where self-sufficiency is so revered, might mock “where’s the old confidence, the can-do spirit, mighty King David? Where’s your dignity? Can’t stand on your own two feet?” Aah—but these questions are never asked by people who are committed to living lives pleasing to God. A sinful David is “on his knees” pleading for life before a holy God. Each of you knows the more serious you become about living for God, the more you are bothered by your separation from Him, your inability to keep your promises and follow thru on your best impulses. You have seen this in your own lives: what used to be OK in your lives has become unacceptable. The jails are filled with common thugs who show no remorse or sorrow about horrible crimes; sensitive souls are distraught over failures tiny by comparison.

The great man of God, David, had good reason to be distraught. According to the tradition, this psalm followed his most famous treachery—when he took Bathsheba, the wife of his loyal warrior, Uriah, slept with her, and then had her husband killed to try to cover his tracks. His only confidence, at this point in his life, is in the forgiving mercy of God. The entire rest of the psalm follows from this first verse, this first premise. David’s self-confidence, his self-image, have been reduced to ashes by the starkness of his sin. He has chosen to contradict the ways of God. (“Sin” is also the name we give for the reality of our ongoing separation from God; as the result of this separation we are capable and too often willing to do all sorts of things we know better than to do, or we fail to do good things we know we should or even must. We never simply outgrow our capacity to disappoint our selves, our loved ones, our God—but as we grow in Christ we grow more and more wise and brave about our true condition and capabilities.)

So David begins this psalm, begins the first day of the rest of his life with his grand sense of self-sufficiency dead, black, lying in ashes, only a sad reminder of something which had been more noble. What a great beginning! “Blessed are you when you are poor in spirit...” “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a humble spirit; a broken and contrite spirit you will not despise, O God...”

It’s one thing if it’s David—it’s another if it’s me. Oh, I often confess that apart from the power of the Holy Spirit in me it’s just a matter of time before I drift right back into my old ways. I know this full well—far too well. But even now I tend to forget—especially when things seem to be going smoothly. Our default position tends to be something like:

--I’m a pretty good person—maybe even better than most...

--God isn’t going to care all that much, just this one time...

--I can handle this habit, overcome this flaw—I just need a little more time...

--I didn’t know then what I know now; besides, it wasn’t all my fault...

But David does not try to run from his guilt, or minimize it. He names it, he “owns it,” he agonizes over it. It brings him to kneel, broken, before the all-forgiving God so that now and only now he can be totally honest and cry out, trusting solely in the divine mercy, “Wash me!...Cleanse me from my sin.” He admits he is as helpless to fix

himself as a pair of dirty old socks are to scrub themselves clean in a tub of filthy water. He kneels *down* and he focus *up*; He appeals to the God whose character of mercy had been already revealed in His acts in human history for a thousand years already before the time of David. David “got it” long before Jesus went to the cross to show the world the constancy of the love of God—wouldn’t it be nice if each of us who knows Jesus “got it” and kept it automatically and permanently...But no: we keep reminding ourselves “it is necessary to pray every day, to study some portion of the Scriptures each day...” There is no “autopilot” in the Christian life. Part of what drives me to my knees, literally or figuratively, is the awareness of the ashes of my former ways, my former nature. And then I am driven on into the mercy of God.

David knew his sin was not just the raunchy stuff he had done, the gradual or sudden shredding of his sense of being perhaps better than others; his sin was not just against those he had hurt. He cried out “Against You, O God, and You alone have I sinned.” “I have no leg to stand on; I have no excuse before You, most Holy God over all.” He knew sin was the core problem. His being separated from God drove his choices, his acts, his attitudes. He knew sin is not a peripheral issue, a matter of a few weak moments when we’re frazzled or haven’t had enough sleep. Sin is present at the core of our being; sin dogs our entire human experience. (Sin never determines our response; sin is never destiny, of course—but neither is it incidental.)

“I was born guilty!” David acknowledges. Not as a theologian, but in frustration and candor at the extent of the corruption at the core, the basic predicament of sin. This is very much a case for ashes, for radical surgery, for a heart transplant. David knew pills or prescriptions or self-help books would not be enough. There is no incremental solution to the problem of sin, no gradually or accidentally easing into the Kingdom of God. (In John’s conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus: “You must be born from above, born again in order to enter into the Kingdom of God. There needs to be a radical break between your former life, the separated, self-directed life, and the New Life abiding in and loyal to and freely enlisted in the service of the risen Christ and the God who has sent Him. The old life has to turn to ashes before you can live the new God-life, which comes as a gift from God. (Whoever heard of giving birth to yourself—by trying harder, “really meaning it this time,” or by any other motive?)

So David knows he is helpless to fix his problem of sin. He cries out to God, “*You* wash me so I’ll be whiter than freshly-fallen snow! *You* cleanse me! *You* purge me with hyssop! [A biblical cleansing herb] *You* create in me a clean heart, O God! (a new beginning, new desire, new mindset, new character) *You* put a new, right spirit within me!” All David’s prior efforts and dreams and delusions were to him as ashes: “You do this new thing in me, O God: I am helpless!”

David did not make the mistake of the zebra who thought if he could scrub himself hard enough and long enough he would become a splendid white unicorn! It cannot happen that I fix my current position by my own efforts, even my own disciplines. The only thing that happens is that the zebra gets tired, worn out, frustrated, cynical. And how many zebras do you know—tired, frustrated, cynical about your Jesus and His Church, thinking they are no longer interested in the One who can make them new from the inside out. Scrubbing at the outside will never give us a new heart on the inside.

It cannot happen that I give myself a heart transplant. I have to recognize that my old heart, some of my old ways, my old hopes and aspirations and pleasures need to be

reduced to ashes and then I may reach up to the God who can make you and me and all things into a new creation. Until then, I'm stuck with an old, inadequate heart.

David is telling us we cannot ever "get there" living on our own terms, our own best efforts, our own power. Our hope is to give up that old life-experiment, abandon the self-sufficiency project—only the Great Physician can give new hearts, make new lives. It sounds so simple, and each of us would agree with him. Yet the power of sin is such that even this week, temptations will come, and some will appear attractive.

--"Go ahead and miss your prayer time this morning. This is such a busy day..."

--"Why don't you just live like everyone else and give God your leftovers.

What's so bad about being normal?"

--"They won't miss me at church this Sunday. I don't need church to be OK with God..."

(And maybe this is a good time for a reminder: the moment we get more serious about our life in Christ, to become women and men of prayer and obedience, is the moment the enemy redoubles his efforts to frustrate us. Think: do you suppose it's just coincidence, as important as you and I know it is to pray every day, and to pray so that it becomes more natural and more powerful and more satisfying and more fun—do you think it's coincidence that so many excuses keep presenting themselves, that so many obstacles keep arising to hold you back from exactly what the enemy most fears? His worst nightmare is you and me and all the Church kneeling before God (on our knees or in our spirit) to know ourselves forgiven, and transformed, and directed, and encouraged and loved and deployed by the God we all want to serve. So don't be surprised: any advance on your part will be met by a counterattack from the enemy. When this happens, consider yourself complimented. Never consider yourself defeated.)

About this point in the psalm we come to the good part. "Let me hear joy and gladness, O God; Restore to me the joy of Your salvation!" Here's the payout; here's the point of Ash Wednesday, and Lent, and penitence, and prayer, and the Christian Way. Once we allow our limited pleasures and plans and programs, our imperfect personal histories to become as ashes, then we become available for God to allow us to participate in His joy—so much larger, richer, more enduring than our own ways.

God does not expect nor desire for us to spend our whole lives on our knees: we kneel from our side so that God may raise us up from His side. We present our former hopes and dreams and pleasures as ashes so that God can enlarge the scope of our hopes and dreams and pleasures; we offer our old hearts so burdened and compromised so that God can keep pouring His love, His energy, His hopefulness into us.

One of my elderly friends went in for heart surgery. After he recovered he was amazed—he could move quickly, climb stairs, walk without having to stop to rest! He had gotten so used to wheezing around and shuffling and avoiding stairs he had forgotten what it was to be healthy. We are every one of us something like Wayne: we had so long lived apart from God we had forgotten what it was like to be alive in Him. You are all relearning with me what it is to have a healthy heart; a new God-given heart.

God is waiting to raise us up to live His new life in us, to share in His joy. Jesus spent those 40 days praying and preparing—and we are told "He went even to the cross for the joy set before Him." His share of the divine joy powered Him even to the dark depths of the cross. Jesus had known the satisfaction of earning an honest living as a carpenter; He had known the pleasure of family life at home; but when His

responsibilities permitted, He exchanged those pleasures for the joy of God's using Him perfectly, "no strings attached," to change the world. He lived to bring the knowledge and the power of the love of God to many, and so to lift them out of their prisons of guilt and poverty and ignorance and violence and hopelessness. He lived to show them they are forgiven, and restored, and made new, to change their lives and their world with their God-given new hearts.

David kneels before God, admitting his sin was so many ashes—and only at that point does he sing, "*Then* I will teach sinners your ways; *then* my tongue will sing and declare Your praise." David begins in repentance, kneeling; God in His mercy accepts his repentance and lifts him up into a life directed into thanksgiving, into action, into service, into influencing others into relationship with the God waiting to give them new hearts and new joy also.

Likewise, Jesus began His public ministry with 40 days of prayer and preparation, focusing (I presume) on how to allow God to have all of His desires, all of His energy, all of His moments and His days, all of His hopes. God the Father raised up Jesus the Son following His 40 days and directed Him into a life of purpose and joy, a life perfectly carrying out the mission of the Father for His life. Then, following Good Friday, the Father raised Him up into an eternity of glory and joy. Ever since Easter Sunday, ashes are no longer only sad reminders of what used to be—but are now reminders of what may be and what will be, by God.

You, too, are a precious daughter of God, a beloved son of God. Kneel humbly before Him, calling upon His mercy—that He might create a clean heart and direct you into the joy of a new life abandoned to Him.

Psalm 51

51:1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

5 Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

6 You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

9 Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

11 Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

16 For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
19 then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then
bulls will be offered on your altar.