

Ash Wednesday Meditation
Emory Presbyterian Church
March 1, 2006 (beginning of my installed pastorate)
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The evening of Ash Wednesday is something of a peculiar time to begin a new pastorate. More often such beginnings are marked by an increase in crowds and fanfare, and that certain brightness of innocence and optimism that so often accompanies fresh starts. In contrast, Ash Wednesday is a somber, slightly grim occasion, weighted as it is with shadowy portents and distasteful truths.

What's more, the celebration of Ash Wednesday, relatively new to us reformed protestants, is invariably scheduled in the evening when there's no chance of any sunshine through the windows to relieve the growing darkness of either our sanctuary or our faith. On Ash Wednesday, the sanctuary itself seems to take on a certain ominous shadow, as though the truth we face together tonight might better be understood in the dimness of candlelight.

You see, tonight's first truth, the first truth of the ritual of Ash Wednesday, is neither a safe truth, nor a welcome one. In fact, the first truth we name together tonight, in the context of our faith and the company of one another, can be called a terrible truth; certainly it has held terror for humankind from the very beginning of our existence. For tonight we face and name together the inescapable truth of our own individual, personal and unavoidable death. The end of life, our life, at least life as we know and love it.

If you're young, you may not get yet just how terrible a truth that is. But then again, given the challenges and trials before today's young people, maybe

you do. If you're old, and your body's breaking down, and friends and family keep dying all around you, well, however you feel about death, it's forever in your face. And if you're somewhere in between young and old, then the inescapable truth of death may be just plain old scary. When you think about it. Which you try not to, too much.

I can see it in your eyes, you know, how you feel about death, whether you think about it, whether you get it, at least in those of you who lift your eyes when I impose the ashes. So many different understandings; so many relationships with death. Sometimes, in your eyes, I see defiance, sometimes denial, sometimes total cluelessness. And then, sometimes, there's surrender, or resignation, or just plain ole' grief.

Whatever our age, experience or understanding of death, on Ash Wednesday, we are all invited to face together, and in the presence of God, the inescapable, life-limiting, often spooky truth that we are dust, and to dust we will return.

So you can see, can't you, why the evening of Ash Wednesday might not be a pastors' first choice for launching their new call to a pulpit? Can understand why this somber evening launching the Lenten season of repentance and reflection might feel just a tad out of sync with the fireworks and grins of a new relationship? I mean, the word 'funereal' comes to mind. *And just how fertile a soil does the grave offer seeds of new life, new love, and new beginnings?*

Hmmm. Interesting question for us Christians. Just how fertile **do** we believe is the soil of the grave?

Well, Ash Wednesday has something to say to that question. To any of us who, before the haunting spectre of death, haven't totally shut down or gone shopping or gotten high or pigged out or dived into work or whatever is our personal m.o. for numbing out, Ash Wednesday has this single piece of advice regarding the husbandry of grave-rooted seeds – well, two pieces of advice if you count the verbs - Repent...and... Believe.

Repent.....turn, change, rearrange, transform, give it up, let it go, get over yourself, and so forth.

And believe..... Believe what? Why, the gospel, of course. And just what *is* the gospel? Well, the short answer, invariably, is 'the good news of Jesus Christ' - which loaded phrase doesn't really tell us all that much, nor, coming from the thin pale lips of Ash Wednesday, really sound all that good.

But remember the grave? And those seeds of new life? Can they grow there, on the grave of what is past and dead and gone? Can new life grow out of death? That's the question, isn't it?, begged so baldly, not just by Ash Wednesday, but by the entirety of our faith journey with the resurrected Jesus? Certainly that's the question you and I will be exploring throughout the coming weeks of Lent; indeed, throughout the coming years of our shared pastorate.

So, really, maybe the dark, bald honesty of Ash Wednesday is *not* such a bad place to start.. In fact, you and me, here, in the dim beauty of this sanctuary, in the loving presence of God and one another, facing together the tandem truths of personal death and gospel life, well, I can't think of any place I'd rather be. To the glory of God. Amen.