

ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH  
BALTIMORE (CITY HALL PLAZA)

Ash Wednesday  
March 9, 2011

Matthew 6 : 1 – 6, 16 – 21  
Joel 2 : 1 – 2, 12 - 17

“Holier Than Thou”

**I don't know about you, but I think Ash Wednesday is a weird day, a weird and strange day that has always kind of puzzled me.**

**See, when I was a kid, Ash Wednesday was the day I had to stop eating candy ... which was a terrible thing for a fat little kid who craved chocolate and sweet rolls.**

**I grew up in the southern part of Germany, and there the weekend before Ash Wednesday is given over to carnival, a four-day marathon of parades and parties and celebrations.**

**It's called “Fastnacht” in German (how many remember this from the old days?), it's called “Fastnacht,” literally, night of fasting, because it is the weekend before Lent begins ... the last few days before what Germans call die “Fastenzeit,” the time of fasting, Lent.**

**For a small kid like me, this didn't make any sense.**

**I mean, one minute, my mother was stuffing me full of pretzels and chips and candy, the next she insisted that I eat no candy at all for 40 days ... talk about going from feast to famine!**

**And you wanna know the absolute weirdest thing that happened to me every year on Ash Wednesday?**

**She sent me off to church so the priest could smear some nasty black oily stuff on my forehead ... this from the woman who insisted that I always wash my face the other 364 days of the year.**

**I wasn't the only one, of course.**

**I grew up in a small village in the Black Forest where to this day most people are Roman Catholic. Back then, everybody went to church on Ash Wednesday - our village church was packed for all three morning masses – and for the rest of that day, wherever you went, you'd see people with a dark smudge on their forehead.**

**It made no sense to me ... and I suspect what Jesus has to say to us on this Ash Wednesday doesn't make much sense to us either, at first look.**

**You see, in this passage from Matthew, Jesus is lifting up three practices that would have been very familiar to an observant Jewish person of his day,**

**three spiritual disciplines, so to speak, three faith practices:**

**Praying – fasting – giving alms.**

**Every Jew, of course, knew that daily prayer was one of the basic expectations of the faith, and so if you were a Jew in Jesus' day, you'd say your prayers and you'd go to the synagogue on a regular basis .... and if you were anyone in your village, you'd make sure that you'd be seen by your neighbors and friends ...**

**... not unlike a church member today who gets all decked out and dressed up and goes to church to show off a new hat and with her holier-than-thou attitude looks down on the person who wears an old coat.**

**Every Jew knew that fasting was part of the faith; in fact, there were five fast days in the Jewish year, the most familiar one being Yom Kippur, the day of repentance and seeking forgiveness. Of course, people being people, they would sometimes brag about how long they'd gone without eating ... not unlike a Christian today who might call in to a televangelist TV show to report how faithful he has been to God's commands, all but demanding public praise from the host.**

**Every Jew knew that alms giving was an expectation of Judaism, in fact, it was the way in which poor people and widows and orphans were being taken care of ... of course, there were those who gave respectable sums and make quite sure that everyone in the community knew about their generosity ...**

**....not unlike today's philanthropists who put their names on the buildings they fund (I mean, just how many more buildings can you name after Harry and Jeanette Weinberg?)**

**So you see, Jesus is on familiar ground here, speaking and teaching about faith practices that were as familiar to the Jewish audience of his day as they are to us.**

**Only ... Jesus turns things around again (you know he's good at that) and complains that people are doing the right things for the wrong reason:**

**They pray .... and show off doing it,**

**they fast ... and expect praise for it**

**they give charitable donations .... and brag about it.**

**Those attitudes, Jesus tells them (tells us), won't get us far with God.**

**“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”**

**So you see, it's about motivation!**

**It's about why we do what we do!**

**It's about what's really important to us!**

**It's about doing the right things for the right reason.**

**Ash Wednesday, this somber day on the church's calendar, this gateway to Lent, reminds us that at the end of life stands the grave.**

**From dust you came, and to dust you shall return, the pastor says when making the sign of the cross on our foreheads**

**a stark reminder of our mortality.**

**It's a mortality we ignore most of the time.**

**I mean, let's be honest. None of us goes around thinking about our death very often, now do we?**

**In fact, you could say that we live as though we'll never die.**

**Our culture is obsessed with preserving youth and delaying death as long as humanly possible:**

**There are entire industries that promise to keep you young if only you use their face cream and join their health club.**

**Medical science today can keep you breathing and living long beyond any reasonable life expectancy if only you have the right kind of insurance.**

**And when death finally does come to someone you love, your friendly neighborhood funeral home will discreetly arrange things so everything is dignified and nobody will have to confront death in all of its finality and ugliness ...**

**Our culture idolizes youth, denies death and dying ...  
Our culture wants to pretend that death doesn't exist ...  
Our culture wants to sanitize death when it does come.**

**which is why Ash Wednesday is so important.**

**Ash Wednesday is that terrible day of darkness and gloom (did you catch that in the first reading) that terrible day of darkness and gloom that the prophet Joel speaks about.**

**Blow the trumpet, sound the alarm, the prophet cries, for the day of judgment is coming, a day of clouds and thick darkness.**

**It's the day when we are finally forced to confront our mortality, to again be reminded that our life ends at the grave.**

**That dirty smudge on your forehead ... that's a stark reminder of what's in store for you, a terrible future that cannot be denied.**

**And then there is verse 12:**

**Yet even now, says the LORD,  
Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping  
and with mourning.**

**Yet even now ... and here comes the great Good News ...  
even now in the face of death and destruction, the Lord says  
to us:**

**Yet even now ... what sweet words ... Return to the Lord your  
God for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and  
abounding in steadfast love.**

**Oh what a powerful word of life in the face of dark death!  
Oh what a glorious promise at the threshold of the grave!  
Oh what a life-giving, death-defying, earth-shattering word of  
hope just when you thought there wasn't any hope.**

**Because you see, death is not the final answer after all,  
and our lives do not end at the grave but begin there.**

**We can face our mortality ... because that is precisely the  
place where God meets us.**

**Return to the Lord your God,  
who is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger  
abiding in steadfast love.**

**So this Lent, instead of focusing on the things we have to  
give up,**

**let's think about the things we gain because of God's grace and mercy.**

**Instead of thinking of Lent as a burden that imposes new duties on us and deprives us of the things we like the most,**

**let's look at Lent as a gift,  
a gift of time,  
a counter-cultural space that orients us away from the distractions of the world and focuses us back on what really counts in life.**

**Let's think of Lent as a period of time that allows us to concentrate once again on what our lives are all about ...**

**a time out, if you will, to re-focus our energy on being right with God and right with our neighbor.**

**By all means, if this is meaningful to you, give up something.**

**Don't eat candy until Easter,  
deny yourself that nightly dessert,  
give up drinking beer for Lent (now there's a true sacrifice for a German ...)**

**I have a friend in Philadelphia who gives up e-mail and the internet for Lent.**

**I myself have decided to do a 40-day fast and like my Muslim friend Wael during Ramadan, eat a light meal only after sundown ...**

**By all means, give something up for Lent if that has been and is your spiritual discipline.**

**But this year, I challenge you to also add something to mark this special season:**

**Add coming to church more regularly**

**Add reading the bible for ten minutes every day**

**Add doing a kindness for a neighbor each week**

**Add spending more quality time with your loved ones**

**Add reaching out to that co-worker that irritates you ... whatever.**

**I promise you that Lent can be a great time of renewal,  
a time of restoration and uplifting,  
a time of re-connecting with God and with those around you,**

**a time that will continue to bless you long after that dirty  
smudge on your forehead has rubbed off.**

**And that, brothers and sisters, is the Good News for you  
today, and to that, let the people of God say, AMEN.**