

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Ash Wednesday
March 5, 2003

The Meaning and Message of the Ashes
Isaiah 58:1-12; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Since the imposition of ashes is still a relatively new thing for Presbyterians
it is good for us to spend some time reflecting
on what we mean by the Ashes
and on what message we proclaim as we pass through the Ashes
into the season of Lent.

Actually, talking about the meaning and message of the Ashes
would be just as important if we had been doing this liturgical act for years
maybe more important
because it tends to be the old, familiar practices that
lose their meaning and their message.

We only have to listen to the frustrated voice of the indignant God of Israel
spoken through the prophet Isaiah
to hear how our acts of worship can become empty and meaningless
if we do not seek – with the greatest of resolve –
to keep some level of consistency and coherence between
the meaning of our worship
and the character of our daily living.

Through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah,
the Lord nearly mocks the worship of the people:
*Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call THIS a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?*

It seems the people of God have stirred up the anger of the Lord
by living unexamined lives, lives filthy with injustice and self-enhancement
only then to run and hide in the sanctuary, feigning humility and piety.

The Lord says to them
*Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers...
Such fasting as you do today will NOT make your voice heard on high.*

So, if not this,
then what kind of fasting – what kind of solemn assembly, what kind of worship –

will make the people's voice heard on high?

The Lord is very clear:

*to loose the bonds of injustice
to undo the thongs of the yoke
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke...[is this not the fast that I choose?]*

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin (take care of your family)*

*THEN your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly...
THEN you shall call, and the Lord will answer
you shall cry for help,
and he will say, Here I am.*

In short, the point here is this:

Don't bother getting ashes on your forehead
unless you are ready – really ready and willing –
to examine your own life and lifestyle
in the most thoroughgoing fashion.

* * * * *

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount,
strikes a note that echoes in full resonance
with the prophet of old.

He calls for God's people to practice their piety with integrity
not in a showy fashion, but with real passion, from the heart.

But if we move below the level of Jesus' rebuke
and take a look at the underlying piety, the underlying practices
that Jesus assumes to be part of the disciple's lifestyle
we begin to see a framework, a sort of outline we can follow
in examining our own lives
in measuring our own piety, our own faithfulness
our own need of repentance.

The first item in the outline is "Almsgiving;"
that is, showing compassion for the needs of the poor
just like Isaiah mentioned earlier.

The second item in the outline is "Prayer:"
not prayer that is self-serving or image-enhancing,
but prayer that is self-examining, self-implicating,

prayer in your closet, on your knees before God, just you and God and your life.
The third item in the outline is "Fasting"
that is, self-denial, self-restraint,
or the disciplined rejection of over-consumption and gluttony.
In other words, making yourself go without something that you're used to having
so as to remember your utter dependence on God for your life.
The fourth item in the outline could be called a lot of things,
but I would suggest calling it "Simplicity;"
that is, the rejection of hoarding, the rejection of material over-abundance.
Hoarding, or material over-abundance, is often prettied up in our society
with phrases like "a better standard of living"
or, "doing better than your parents did"
or by the all too general term "economic growth"
which leaves out the question of 'who grew?'
and whether that growth was enjoyed by the many, or only by the few.
Much of the economic growth we experience, put into biblical terms
should rightly be called "storing up treasures on earth."
Our love of treasure, or the fact that we have grown accustomed to certain treasures,
leads to the unjust practice of 'storing up' and 'hoarding.'

* * * * *

Now the problem with this outline of faithful Christian piety
is not understanding it, or agreeing THAT we should follow it;
it is figuring out how to renounce the powers of sin and evil
which are at work in our lives
and keep us from walking the path Christ has shown us.

Just so you know I'm preaching to myself, too,
let me offer a few reflections on my day
which might help to illustrate the difficulty of true Christian piety.

(Car Keys)

I have driven about 24 miles today in a gar that gets about 18 miles to the gallon around town.
I try to drive in such a way as to conserve gasoline:
within the speed limit; avoiding fast starts and stops; and so on.
But I know that my car-centered, suburban lifestyle is very dependant on fossil fuels,
many of which we buy from the Middle East.
And since our whole country is dependent on this kind of gas-guzzling
our democratically-elected government has to make access to these fossil fuels
a very high priority in the foreign policy agenda.
Now the world is a complex place, and I don't understand it all,
but I worry that this fuel priority of ours might sometimes lead us
to make decisions that do not promote the human well-being of our neighbors
in that region, or beyond that region in the rest of the world.

Do I know what to do about this? Not really. Do I have any answers? Not very easy ones. Maybe I could buy one of these hybrid cars that run on half-gas and half-electricity. The cost a lot more money; but then I understand I may get a tax deduction for buying one. Whatever I do about this, I cannot simply ignore the lifestyle I'm caught up in,
I cannot just sit comfortably with it, or turn up the music and forget about it
if I'm going to put ashes on my head tonight.

(Gullivers Coffee Cup)

On my way to study in the seminary library today,
I stopped in at the Sonoco station and paid 95 cents for a cup of GulliversCoffee.
It's pretty good coffee, and they have a nice selection to choose from.
I don't mind paying 95 cents – it's a lot cheaper than Starbucks,
and the cup itself makes me feel pretty good about this cup of coffee by telling me:
“Just as Gulliver's mission was
to find the finest selection of coffee beans from around the world,
our mission is
to bring them to you, delivered fresh, friendly, fast, and brewed [to perfection].”
Only, the problem with feeling good about this cup of coffee is that
I've been listening to my Presbyterian brothers and sisters in the Presbyterian Coffee Project,
and I've been talking to my friends at Heifer International,
who tell me that the Latin American family who grew the beans for this cup of joe
probably had no choice but to sell those beans for 60 cents a pound
which is about 60 cents less than they need
to be able to put food on their table and clothes on their back.

Now here's something I CAN do:

I can choose to spend more on my coffee, so the hands that harvested the beans
which so satisfy my taste buds, can have at least one good meal a day.
And my brothers and sisters in the Presbyterian Coffee Project
have lots of good suggestions about ways to do that.
(see www.equalexchange.com)

(Giant Eagle Bag)

A more difficult problem is what I pick up and put into one of these bags.
For instance, friends tell me that I shouldn't buy out-of-season fruit from Chile
because the Chilean farmers are forced by the global economy
to grow and sell this fruit at far below a living wage
so I can have strawberries out of season.

This is just one of the stories I hear,
so it's hard to know what grocery items to put in one of these bags;
and I suspect that, as hard as I try, as careful as I am,
I am going to “oppress the workers” who grew and harvested them.

Even worse, when I get home with these many bags

I sometimes complain that my kitchen lacks the cabinet space to store all this food

(Bag of ¼ cup of rice)

When I say things like this,

I am forgetting that most of the third world has only ¼ cup of rice to eat each day.

Not very much. I suppose if you cooked it, it might look like a little more.

So what do I do?

I can't do everything; I can't change the world;

But knowing my limits as a human being

doesn't mean I can just ignore the injustice of the situation.

So I do what I can. I shop carefully. I support Heifer International
in their amazingly successful work against hunger.

I can buy coffee from places like Equal Exchange on the web,
or 10,000 Villages here in Pittsburgh, and pay above market prices for it.

And I can remember, this Sunday at Glenshaw Presbyterian Church, to bring a canned good
which will be given to the local food pantry at Calvert Memorial,
and I keep remembering to do this every Sunday during Lent, and maybe even after Lent.

* * * * *

So what does all this have to do with the meaning and message of Ashes?

Simply this:

Ashes remind us of our humanity,
and that means our common humanity
with every other human being on this earth.

Ashes remind us that, whether we like it or not
we live in relationship with those other human beings
and our choices affect them.

Ashes remind us that, like our neighbors
in Chile, Colombia, Iraq, Jerusalem, and Ramallah,
we are not gods, but mortal.
and therefore
we depend on God for our lives.

We need to be reminded of these things, because when we forget that we are dust
we begin to depend on ourselves to stay alive;
we begin to store up treasures on earth
we become over-indulgent and gluttonous
we stop giving alms to help our neighbors in need
and even our prayer becomes self-serving.

The meaning of the ashes is that you and I – in truth – depend on God for our lives.

The message of the ashes is that

we can choose to live that way;

we can choose to repent of our 'self-dependent' 'in-dependent' way of life
and through our daily choices, choose the way of God-dependence
which probably means giving up some luxury
to which I've grown accustomed.

Paul reminds us that reorienting our lives

away from independence and self-dependence
and toward God-dependence will not be easy.

But through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities...

...with sleepless nights and hunger...

*by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech,
and the power of God,*

with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left

we will make known to the world that

today is the day of salvation,

today is the day that we can embrace God's offer of life.

But the life of God-dependence in a world of blind independence
will not be easy.

But Paul urges us onward, saying:

We are treated as imposters, and yet are true;

as unknown, and yet are well known [by God];

as dying, and see – we are alive;

as punished, and yet not killed;

as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing;

as poor, yet making many rich;

as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Receiving the imposition of ashes mean embarking on THIS journey of God-dependence.

It means taking up the message – on your lips and in your life –
that God-dependence is not a diminished standard of living
but the only standard by which true life can be lived.

As we prepare to receive this sign of our faith
let us join together in confessing our sin
and our desperate need of God's mercy.