

(Scriptures for this week: Psalm 23, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, John 5:25-30)

I have looked for an hour searching for my elusive phone. I misplaced it - not the first nor the last time. Finally, that inner voice said, relax. So, I sat in my chair to work on our Ash Wednesday service. Looking up, I saw my phone on the fireplace mantle. Now I remember. I saw it happen to my parents, now me.

It takes me back to my farm days and remembering the early lessons of life. The wisdom taught by my grandparents and parents, aunts and uncles. While it was not a daily topic of discussion, we saw it firsthand on the farm. The seasons of life and death where those voices spoke- "time waits on no one." The day you are born is the day you begin to die. Listening to these words helps me take this journey call life. Strangely they bring peace and hope. I am the next generation, facing death, closer than I was before. How, when, how long, we don't know. Those past voices help me appreciate the gift of life, bring comfort, aiding my soul to see new perspectives even in the messiness of life. How do you listen to your soul? How do you listen for God?

What does listening to your soul and Ash Wednesday have in common? On Ash Wednesday, we put ashes on our forehead, our "third eye," if you will. In the past, I have caught myself laughing as I looked at others marked with a blackened oily smudge on their forehead.

Now I find myself looking at Ash Wednesday with new eyes. Why do we present our foreheads for this "imposition of ashes?" How will Ash Wednesday move you and me in a new direction? How does it speak to you?

Of course, I can only speak for myself about my reasons. Each individual participating in this ritual has his or her own take on it. At one level of understanding, I present my forehead for marking with ashes as a reminder that our embodiment, our morality. We come from dust to dust we shall return. There is a season: a time to live and a time to die. Each moment of our finite lives is precious. To live mindfully for life is a gift. Our life has value. That is enough of a reason in and of itself to participate in this religious ritual!

Wait! I believe there is more! When we take life for granted, we need to repent, turn around, and move in a new direction. It is another level of understanding. Marking the third eye like a cross represents the importance of opening ourselves to higher wisdom. God is the author of new life. He sent his Son to deliver us from the penalty of death. If we pay attention and begin to look within, we might catch glimpses of our soul, glimpses of a larger and more beautiful realm from our experience of senses and reason.

The cross – an intersection between humanity and the divine – reveals hope in life. In Christ, old things are passing away, new beginnings emerge, drawing our soul close to God.

Listening to our soul and symbols, we remember. Ashes, bread, and wine, wisdom are visual reminders of that mysterious area - that "thin place" – between life and death. The past and present between the secular and the sacred are reminders God is watching over us. Opposing opposites causes us to explore farther into the meaning of Lent, of life.

These symbols help us realizes what may seem to be contrary forces are interconnected and interdependent. If we can think this way, we might see that opposites can exist in relation to each

other, giving rise to new ways of seeing and being.

Many wisdom and mystical traditions recognize the importance of the third eye-seeing in a new way. My understanding of the ashes comes from a widespread belief that fire is something that purifies yet regenerates. Since ashes are the residue of fire, they have the same properties. Properties of purification and regeneration are certainly major themes in Lent. Why not bread and wine, silent, and reflection, why not crosses and life? We in the modern world ignore and devalue our rituals.

Rituals are important. I believe the imposition of ashes reminds us that within this mortal body are moments of wondrous "coincidence," (pause) where our heart, mind, and body can become aware of the divine. Where we can touch the face of God and feel His presence, while at the same moment, the divine instantaneously opens our soul, and we resist no more the spirit of God that stirs our soul and help us see. "God whispers, reveal and draw. Stirs and turns us to go deeper still, remembering God speaks and feeds our soul. When we take time to listen, when we allow our rituals to speak to us, we experience a moment of deep inner connection pulling you to a place of holy awe, where you experience both profound joy and profound sadness at the very same time." You confront the mysterious areas between life and death. Between the secular and the sacred, that reveals the divine voice that moves you in a new direction. On this Ash Wednesday, we celebrate and remember the sacred mystery of life and death with the imposition of ashes and celebrate new life in the Great Thanksgiving. Let us remember our mortality, but the gift of new life in Christ.

Opening Liturgy:

"In the softness of evening, in the solace of silence, we come to you, O Lord. We come for acceptance, we come for the community, we come for forgiveness and love."

Your Response: "O Lord, Hear My Prayer"

Silence

"In the serenity of day's end, in the restfulness of worship, we come to you O Lord. We come to you for respite, we come to you for completion, we come to you for forgiveness and love."

Your Response: *O Lord, Hear My Prayer*

Silence

"In the quiet of the night, in the comfort of darkness, we come to you, O Lord. We come for peace, we come for comfort, we come for forgiveness and love."

Your Response: O Lord, Hear My Prayer

We come, O Lord of Light, seeking the illumination of your Word. We come for the path we can't find, we come for life we don't have. We come to you for our lives is death and you alone have breath and being.

(At this time, prepare the ashes by placing the oil into the ashes. If you are with someone, you may place them onto another's forehead. If alone, you may place them on your forehead.)

Imposition of Ashes:

“In your mercy, you call us to the path of repentance. You remind us in your Word that we are earth and dust. You promise to lift the poor from the dust. Come and receive the sign of repentance. As an act of turning back to you, I place these ashes as a reminder, from ashes I came, and to ashes, I will return. Lead me from this day forward to walk and talk with you. Amen.:

The Celebration of the Gift of Life - Holy Communion:

(Prepare your elements of bread and wine. If you have not picked up a communion set from the church, items you feel that represent the body and blood of Christ is fitting)

“Now I hear the Good News, for my soul is in your hands. Heavenly Father, we live in a troubled world. Things happen that we do not understand. Unexpected events have turned our thoughts away from you. We are fearful because we have no control over these events. Life is complicated, and life in this world is often unfulfilling. We hunger for the bread that is not of this world. We long for the bread of life. As we prepare our hearts to receive your Holy Thanksgiving, let us pray:

“Bread of Life, you feed us through your words and this sacrament. The bread we share is a remembrance of your presence with us. Strengthen us for service, that seeds we sow in fertile places might grow and flourish, that food we share in fellowship might nourish and revive, that words we share in our daily walk might glorify your name. Bread of Life, you feed us that we might feed others.

Blessed be your name!

When the journey is long and we hunger and thirst, Bread of Life, you sustain us. When the road is hard and our bodies are weak, Bread of Life, you heal us. When our spirits are low and we can't carry on, Bread of Life, you revive us. When we offer our hand in love and service, Bread of life, you bless us. When the challenge is great and the workers are few, Bread of Life, you empower us. When the victory is won and we see your face, Bread of Life, you will rejoice with us!

Now in silence, remember your blessings and what Jesus Christ has done for you.”

Blessing over the elements:

Prayer: “Bless the elements of bread and wine so that I may remember your gift of life and the promise of new life in Christ”

We come and remember your holy words: “This is my body given for you, this is my blood given for you. Take, eat: do this in remembrance of me.”

Prayer: “May the Lord keep and watch over you on this journey of life. Amen.”