

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, February 18, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Ash Wednesday.

Today

we will do

one of the most outrageous things

that the church has ever done.

We will take dirty old

ashes,

dip in our thumbs,

and smear them on people's foreheads

in the shape of a cross.

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Dirt.

Destruction.

Death.

It's hardly an uplifting theme.

And yet this action

is incredibly powerful.

In a world where keeping up appearances

is so important,

where we try so hard to present our best selves to the world,

Ash Wednesday creates a space

when we can be truly, brutally honest

with ourselves

and with God.

Sometimes people tell me

that they don't like this emphasis in our tradition,

when we talk about our unworthiness,

or as our collect put it,

our wretchedness.

Those words

feel as if they belong

to a bygone era,

one where the threat of hellfire and damnation

was used to scare people into the church

and the language of sin
and the demand for repentance
were used in ways that were abusive,
that damaged people.

But that abuse
doesn't nullify the truth of what it is to be human.
We're a mess, most of us,
in one way
or another.
We've made mistakes.
We've done things that are wrong.
We've hurt other people.
And here,
in front of God
we don't have to pretend.
We can open our hearts
and be honest.
We can admit
that we are,
we are tainted by evil.
We feel dirty.
We can be destructive.
We are headed for death.

And in a few minutes, after the imposition of ashes,
we will confess to God
all of that.
We will confess
that we have sinned by our own fault
in thought, word, and deed;
by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.
We will confess our lack of love and forgiveness,
our failure to serve God,
our unfaithfulness,
our self-indulgence,
our anger and envy,
our dishonesty,
our negligence in prayer,

our indifference and blindness and prejudice and waste.
We will confess all those.
It won't
be easy.

We might feel guilty.
We might feel
that we've messed up so badly
that we can never be forgiven
We might feel as if the bad things that have happened to us
are because God
is punishing us.
We might feel deep down
that there is something wrong with us, something
that even God
can't
forgive.

We might feel that way.

But when we're done
we can heave a huge sigh of relief.
Because we're done.
And it will be time
to let it all go.

Because the point of Ash Wednesday
is not to have us groveling
before God.
The point
is for us to be so honest with God
and with ourselves
that we can let all that go.
We can let it go,
and then we can hear the good news,
we can actually hear
how God has acted in the past
when confronted with human sin
has acted
with grace

and mercy and forgiveness
and will act the same way with us now,
and on
to the end of time.

You heard our psalm.
It was a psalm of remembering,
a psalm of remembering
how in spite of all the failures of the people of God
for generation after generation,
in spite of all that
God acted with grace
and mercy and forgiveness.

Listen.

[God] forgives all your sins
and heals all your infirmities;
He redeems your life from the grave
and crowns you with mercy and loving-kindness;
He satisfies you with good things,
and your youth is renewed like an eagle's.

The LORD executes righteousness
and judgment for all who are oppressed.

The LORD is full of compassion and mercy,
slow to anger and of great kindness.
He will not always accuse us,
nor will he keep his anger for ever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.
As far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our sins from us.
As a father cares for his children,
so does the LORD care for those who fear him.

God has acted that way in the past God's mercy is great,
God's mercy is beyond
what we can imagine.

After our confession,
after that honesty
that is so hard for us,
then
we will hear
the wonderful promise of God
who is the God of all mercy,
the God who treats us with compassion and kindness,
the God who loves us
more than the most loving father,
the God who doesn't make us pay for our sin
but who in Christ
dealt with our sin
once and for all,
who gives us
the assurance of perfect remission,
the freedom of full forgiveness,
the joy of second chances
and who leads us
into life.

“Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me, bless his holy Name.”