

Isaiah 58:1–11
Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

ASH WEDNESDAY MEDITATION: “We All Fall Down”

“Ring around the rosie, a pocketful of posies, ashes, to ashes, we all fall down” Do you remember that nursery rhyme.

Some explain that rhyme originated as the bubonic plague ravaged Europe and England during the middle ages. People were dying from the plague by the thousands day after day. Drawings and other art from that time include pictures of dead bodies being loaded up on carts or wagons. The art exposed the terrible reality of the plague.

Why connect the nursery rhyme with the plague? Well, one of the symptoms of the plague was a red rash, which was often found in circles on the body, so *ring around the rosie*.

And there was widespread thought that the plague came from bad smell that existed everywhere, and so people, or maybe just children, would carry packets filled with posies to ward off the smell.

So “Ring around the rosie, a pocketful of posies, ashes to ashes, we all fall down” was simply a description of what was happening every day, all the time. People were dying.

“Ring around the rosie, a pocketful of posies, ashes, to ashes, we **all** fall down.”

Most scholars think this explanation for the origin of this nursery rhyme is, well, hogwash. Perhaps the scholars are correct, but the story that has built up around this rhyme fascinates me. It’s intriguing.

Tonight, Ash Wednesday, the ending of the rhyme conveys the sense of our anxiety, our hesitation and angst as we enter the Lenten season. ***Ashes to ashes, we all fall down.***

Ashes to ashes, we all fall to death at some time. We prefer to dance around the roses. I understand that's what we prefer.

To choose life. To live to the full. Away, you negative thoughts! Down with death!

And we do everything we can to avoid death. We have our own ways of carrying packets of posies to ward off the smell of death, but it's futile. In the end, each one of us will succumb. Ashes, to ashes, we **all** fall down.

Tonight we invite you to come forward to receive the mark of ashes on your forehead, a sign that will be made with ashes that were made from the burning of Palm Sunday palms.

The words you'll hear as you receive the ashes,— as the ashes are smudged on your forehead in the sign of the cross, are "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return."

That's depressing. But the words are meant to remind us that life is temporary. The words are meant to sound the trumpet for us—to sound a strong piercing alarm—the announcement that life, our lives, don't last forever.

We are formed from dust, and one day we will return to dust. To remember that our lives are temporary is to remember to live our lives well.

The words Kate read from Isaiah speak about fasting and instruct us about the kind of fast God desires from us. The people in Isaiah's day are grumbling to God.

"Look, they say, God, we are fasting; why aren't you noticing?" We humble ourselves ... yet you do not pay attention and reward us." Why don't you give us proper credit for what we do?

And God, through the mouth of Isaiah, replies, "you might be fasting, but you are also, at the same time, oppressing your workers."

The words from Isaiah are a call to line to align our ways of living with our religious practices and professions.

To loose the bonds of injustice.

To share our bread with the hungry.

To break every yoke,

These are ways of living God requires of us. —
And that's a pretty daunting task.

The words from Matthew's gospel speak about fasting and instruct us about the kind of fast God desires from us. Matthew challenges how hypocrisy stalks our lives. Can warp even our best intentions. Jesus' instruction about prayer, like so much of what Jesus says, is hyperbole—exaggerated to get our attention and to get across his point.

Jesus' argument is not to criticize praying in public but to correct those who use prayer to pretend they are religious and to help themselves believe they are faithful.

And so Jesus declares, "You will be better off, by giving up your showmanship. Your grandstanding. Rather, try humility and the very hard work of prayer, the hard work of daily prayer, in a closet." Jesus is warning against hypocrisy and superficiality.

I suspect that each one of us has come to this Ash Wednesday service for different reasons, but all of us are looking for something. Looking for, perhaps a definite start to the Lenten season, a way to set the season apart and to be aware of God. And to be in-tune with the ways and will of God.

Or perhaps you have come for inspiration. To be lifted-up to see life in a richer perspective.

Perhaps you're seeking a chance to stop ... to think, to get centered, to decide —will you give up something or will you take something up? To help. To heal.

Perhaps you're intending to try to get closer to Jesus. To try to identify with something of what he experienced. To take-on the mind of Christ.

My hope for all of us is that no matter what we do this Lenten season, we will try to get honest—honest with ourselves... and honest with God ... and honest with one another.

It's honesty, shedding our pretenses and the ways in which we try to fool even ourselves, that will be a corrective to our individual and collective hypocrisy.

The ashes we receive on our foreheads can be a reminder of our honesty. Ashes ... they are basic stuff. And they can remind us that we are human and in the end our struggles and sins and accomplishments and skills will turn to dust. We are mortal and we easily sin.

The shape of the cross smudged on our foreheads will also be imperfect. A pretty cross of ashes is hard to make with our thumbs and forefingers on a variety of foreheads. And so the crosses will be imperfect too, because we are human.

But the crosses will remind us that despite our sin, despite our humanity, we are sons and daughters of God, forgiven and freed from the weight of our failings. Forgiven and loved in our ordinariness. Loved and welcomed in our honesty.

A prayer I discovered in a funeral liturgy asks God “to help us live as those prepared to die, and when our days here are ended, enable us to die as those who go forth to live,”

Powerful words: “Help us to live as those prepared to die and enable us to die as those who go forth to live.”
so that living or dying our life may be in Jesus Christ our risen Lord.

Yes, we all fall down. And through this Lenten season we will recognize how far we have fallen. But death does not have the last word. God does. The risen Christ has the final word. And that word is LOVE. And that word is LIFE.