



**First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield**  
**429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330**  
***Creating Community, Welcoming All***

**Sermon**      February 21, 2021    “Ashes to Ashes”    Rev. David Jones

Ash Wednesday and Lent are tricky in the UCC. There is an ambivalence about the observance, I think. This suits me, as someone who didn't receive ashes for the first time until last year when I was a student chaplain at Baystate in Springfield.

I remember at the beginning of that day at the hospital I wasn't exactly sure that I would accept ashes, but as it turns out, if a kind, elderly woman, volunteering her time and effort to make sure every single patient and employee in the hospital who would like to receive ashes does receive them--when *she* politely asks you if *you* would like to receive them as well, it is very hard to say no. And...I found that I enjoyed the ritual, and I enjoyed the meaning that I felt and saw all day right there on me, that was connected to this woman's faithful service to the hospital community. Somehow my own work that day felt more personal, more like hers; more like a gentle touch on the forehead, more like something graciously given and graciously received.

I know that Lent is a somber season, but I remember smiling more on that Ash Wednesday than on other days. And I knew as I walked around that day--when I got lunch at the cafeteria, when I got in line for my afternoon coffee, when I was visiting with patients and staff--that many of the people around me with ashes on their forehead had had that same experience I did, that experience of accepting ashes simply because of the kindness and warmth of the woman offering them. And of course many others did work up the courage to politely decline. And others sought them out in their devotion. But I nonetheless felt surrounded by a common good will. Whatever the symbol or ritual meant to each of us, I was reminded through it of our larger and shared purpose, to serve the needs of the sick and injured, and the needs of the laborers--service workers, surgeons, nurses, security guards--who were helping others to get some rest and to be comforted.

Having had this experience at the hospital last year, I knew I wanted to worship at an Ash Wednesday service this year. Here in Ashfield, we are blessed by the ministry of our neighbors at St. John's Episcopal. There, in addition to receiving ashes, I heard a moving Ash Wednesday sermon. Rev. Vicki Ix reminded us that in this past year we have all suffered and sacrificed quite enough. She certainly invited us to do those things like fasting if they do in fact feed our spirits and prepare us for the Holy Week ahead. But she also urged us to accept God's grace, and to worry less about personalizing our sacrifices and more about personalizing the work of God's justice. Personalizing the work of justice, discovering how justice serves us all, how it fits into our daily lives right here where we live and work, takes a great deal of time and effort. If we've taken up all our time agonizing over ourselves then even our most meaningful rituals can lose their meaning.

On our first Sunday in Lent, our scripture readings relate to two very familiar Lenten episodes. In the reading from Genesis, God seals a new covenant with humanity and with the earth and all its living creatures. This new covenant follows in the wake of Noah's forty day journey with his family and all the

creatures that he could gather aboard the ark, riding out the great and devastating Flood. Then in our gospel reading, after he has been baptized by John the Baptist, and the Spirit has descended upon him, the Spirit immediately drives Jesus into the wilderness where he stayed for forty days. There is a connection here between water and wilderness, between baptism and a period of temptation, between the new relationship God seeks with humankind and Creation through Noah and the new kingdom on earth that God is seeking through the life and ministry of Jesus.

And of course there is a connection between Ash Wednesday and Holy Week that is not only spiritual or liturgical. The ashes that that woman graciously offered to me last year at the hospital were the ashes from the previous year's Palm Sunday. These ashes from the fingertip of one person to the forehead of another bond the triumphant arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to the person who is just now being marked at the outset of their own journey. In this way, the ashes, the mark, is not a solemn thing--or not only solemn--but it is our own transfiguration, earthly dust and ash that is like the flipside of the otherworldly bright light of Jesus on the mountaintop we read about last Sunday. If we remember from last week, Jesus refused to dwell on the mountaintop; he has to come down back to the earth to serve the people. How quickly his shining white clothes will be marked with ashes and dust and stained and smudged with the stuff of real life.

This is what I want to emphasize for us in our Lenten season this year. Lent is supposed to prepare us, to build us up, for the enormous spiritual weight of the Cross. But this year Lent didn't just begin on Ash Wednesday. This year, Lent seems to stretch all the way back to last year's Ash Wednesday. And I remember that too, that it was just a few weeks after Ash Wednesday that our churches were emptied and our hospitals were overfilled. Somehow in this year long Lent we have already been to the Cross and have had to stay there.

This year I want us to prepare for the resurrection. I want us to prepare for the spring and for summer. The name Noah means relief or rest or comfort; I want us to prepare for relief. Because I think actually we are nearing the *end* of Lent. We are starting to get a glimpse of the edge of the wilderness; the Flood waters may finally be beginning to recede. This long Lent will stretch beyond Easter Sunday. But the first signs are appearing.

As in the Lenten episodes we read today in scripture, the old way, the old relationships, the old kingdoms won't do. Those should die in this long Lenten season. Since we know, from Genesis, that God is committed to not destroying the earth, the earth's corruption by climate change must be our doing. Since we know God is committed to preserving every human life ("all flesh"), the loss of basic essential services in Texas and the crisis of the most vulnerable being left to freeze must be our doing too. Whenever this Lenten season finally ends, we will need to remember that we have a part in this covenant with God too; we haven't been keeping it.

This morning I want to remember the ashes if you accepted them on Wednesday; or remember where they came from, whether you took them or not. Remember that our brother Jesus, our teacher, is out here in the wilderness, wandering with us, feeling the same temptation to carry on as we did before our baptism, and before the Flood. And his stamp, like God's, runs deep to our soul. If you could not in good conscience--if you could not in listening to the genuine within you--turn your back on a neighbor in a crisis, we better use what time we have left in this long Lent to figure out how to build a new society that isn't constantly putting people into crisis in the first place. We have got to use this time to figure out how our values and our politics are not just things we say and feel but are actually things that we share and do. The time for dwelling on our private mountaintops is over. We have to come down now to each other, to our communities, to our genuine selves, and not use our best values to shame others (or ourselves), but use our best values to build up our best communities--communities of grace.

In this last year, from one Ash Wednesday to another, our communities have sacrificed and fasted without choosing to. The time to let go of this long Lent is coming.

*Amen.*

