

ASH WEDNESDAY 2018

It was Ash Wednesday, the woman sitting in the crowded Catholic Church, leaned over to the young man next to her and asked: "what is it that brings so many people out on a cold day, to get a little dirt smeared on their foreheads, to be reminded that they are sinners, and that they are going to die?"

He looked at her somewhat oddly and said, "it's a habit, I guess." Well I hope it is more than habit that brings you here today – well whatever the reason, we are glad you are here.

It is true that we don't have to be here; Ash Wednesday is not a holy day of obligation—

Yet interestingly, in most years, more Catholics come to church on this day than on many holy days.

You might call Ash Wednesday the church's *yom kippur* or "day of atonement." Its very name comes from the Jewish practice of doing penance by wearing "*sackcloth and ashes*."

Ashes are a sign for us - that we are sinners in need of God's mercy and forgiveness.

The prophet Joel tell us that simple sorrow for our sins is not enough. What is needed is a true conversion.

His words are proclaimed on Ash Wednesday to call us to repentance.

Our Lenten journey should be genuine and meaningful. It cannot be mere ritual; we must rend our hearts not our garments, as the prophet tells us.

During this lent you will be seeing other kinds of signs around the building – road signs. Our pastorate theme for this Lent is: “Are we there yet? Journeying with Jesus”.

On last week’s bulletin there was an orange warning sign – “Slow Construction Zone”. If you drive down main street in Middletown warning signs like that one are a daily encounter.

Our first pastorate wide bulletin last week also had a quote from Joel, again part of our First Reading: “even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart....”

And we know that God wants us to return to him and he is ready to lead us on a journey to get closer to him.

No one should be left behind on this road trip.

All of us must be on the journey according to Joel, the entire assembly – elders, children, and infants at the breast, brides and bridegrooms, sinners and saints.

Saint Paul in the Second Reading “implores and appeals” to the Corinthians and to us as well to be reconciled to God and to become ministers of reconciliation to others.

Don't delay – take off that cruise control - for now is the time to accept salvation into our lives, to turn from our mistaken ways and to find the path of truth.

In today's Gospel from Matthew, Jesus gives his disciples instructions on three forms of repentance: almsgiving, fasting, and prayer.

The point is, to be fully effective our Lenten practices must be a matter of the heart, not appearance.

Today, as in past years, as the ashes are imposed on our forehead, the minister will say one of two formulas:

Remember you are dust and to dust you will return” or “Repent and believe in the Gospel.”

The first formula is taken from the Book of Genesis in which God has begun to reveal the consequences of humanity's first sin. Adam is told “for out of the ground you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

The second formula, an exhortation to turn away from sin, comes from the Gospel of Mark at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry:

“This is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel.”

So, during this road trip through Lent let us heed those warning signs, there may be a sharp curve ahead.

Slow down a bit and turn away from the attractive but passing things of the world—food, money, and that self-sufficiency that hardens our hearts.

We hope you will use that road between your house and this building a little more often:

--come to the Stations of the Cross every Friday

--this year you can stay just a bit longer and experience Evening Prayer – Vespers - from the Liturgy of the Hours – hosted by our lay Carmelite and Franciscan communities.

--if you can, come to daily mass – maybe just once during the week.

--and get to Confession. There is no better time than Lent and many more opportunities to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

--we even have some rest stops along the way with a couple of soup nights and fish fry's.

--read the daily reflection from the five minutes with the word booklet

--give alms by saving your change for Haiti – those coins feed the school kids at St. Martha

Our Lenten efforts are never wasted. Even our faults and failings, our wrong turns, are part of our formation, our pilgrimage, to come closer to our Lord. Don't get discouraged.

The visible sign of ashes on the forehead create what one person called the community of the smudged and imperfect sent forth to be a sign of God's love and mercy for all.

We pray that our Lenten practices will enable us to grow in faith, hope, and love. And who knows maybe some of them will become a habit.