

“ASHES TO ASHES”

a meditation on Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

For Ash Wednesday

March 1, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller

Sumner, Mississippi

I have to admit to you, during all my years growing up in Methodist and Presbyterian Churches, I can't recall ever attending an Ash Wednesday Service. Maybe they were held, and my family just didn't go to them, I'm not sure. But I don't recall that the "season" of Lent was particularly emphasized in the churches I attended, either. It wasn't until I was ordained, and in a church in North Carolina that I became familiar with this tradition. I remember *Christmas* traditions from my childhood, and *Easter* traditions, but not much in between.

What I have come to appreciate over the years - and "Calvinist" that I am, it took some convincing - is that looking at the Christian year in terms of its *progression* through "cycles" in which we prepare for, and then celebrate the events of the incarnation and our redemption, not only *matches* our human experience, but also gives us a way to "connect" the flow of the "outside world" and the stories of our lives, with "THE story" – the Biblical story of God's mercy and grace.

That is the genius of the Old Testament feast system, and the calendar of celebrations which Jews observe to this day. More than a set of "celebrations," the Jewish calendar is a *discipline* of consciously *connecting* the story of God's faithfulness to the people of Israel with the annual cycle of planting and harvesting, and with the significant events of human life. And in Judaism, keeping the "feasts" of the year isn't just a matter of attending a few special services at the synagogue. It is a matter of ordering your life around the discipline of connecting your daily life to the Biblical story. At the dinner table, for instance "symbolic foods" are eaten, to spark conversation between grown-ups and children, and liturgies are read, so that all together, the family *remembers* and *celebrates*.

So should it be with the Christian year. Our seasons shouldn't just be a matter of the hymns we sing in worship services, and the content of sermons. They should be a way for us to connect our personal lives and stories with the story of God's grace in Christ Jesus.

It is not by coincidence that in the Western Church the season of Lent – with its emphasis on human mortality and limitedness – occurs at the end of winter, when the world around us is about as bleak and bland as it ever gets, or that Easter finally arrives in tune with the new life and birth of springtime. Those “symbols” and our *experience* of them are opportunities to make *connections* with the story of our redemption.

The next element of this evening’s service is called the “Invitation to the Lenten Discipline.” It does take *discipline* to observe Lent - whether you observe it by a commitment to study, or diet, or giving up something you truly *enjoy* doing or consuming, or in some other way. Lent is a difficult season, and it takes discipline to observe it. Christmas and Easter are easy. Even Mardi Gras is easy. It’s easy to celebrate, and rejoice, and indulge. It is much harder to lament, reflect, and be “penitent.” But the truth of what we recognize in this season is no less important than what we celebrate forty days from now. We are “temporary” creatures, physically. Like all other living things, we will one day die. Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust. *We are dust. And to dust we shall return.*

The Lenten discipline is *important*, because it is precisely from its recognition of our “limited nature,” that we can come to understand our *need* for God’s presence and Spirit in our lives, and *appreciate* the promises of Scripture. And so I do *invite* you to observe this Lenten discipline - and not just by your participation in this evening’s service, but by your own personal commitment (which this service *symbolizes*) to spend the days of this season connecting your self and your story with the story of all humanity, and with the story of our Lord’s passion.

The traditional Scripture readings for this service – from Joel and Matthew – are warnings, though, to consider your *motives* in undertaking the discipline. Lent isn’t for “show.” It is for *real* repentance and humility, because it is only to the extent that we become aware of our need for both individual communal repentance, and as we recognize with *humility* that *none* of us is perfect or has all the answers save God alone, that the Lenten discipline can truly prepare us for the celebration of Easter morning.

And yet, “even now,” God says, “return to me *with all your heart* . . . rend your *heart*, and not your garments . . . [and] who knows whether [God] will not turn and repent, and leave a blessing behind him.

Soli Deo Gloria – to God alone be the Glory.