

Ashes (Kimball, Nebraska)
Matthew 4:4-11
First Sunday of Lent, 1 March 2020
From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Matt Matthews

The Lord be with you.

I begin with a true story about a lonely man in the wilderness:

He left the west coast for the drive back east. He started out dog tired. Near the end of his second day, driving through Cheyenne, the loneliness of I-80 and all the wide, western spaces conspired to make him feel small. Bone tired, he had begun to think how good a drink might taste—not water, but something much harder. Approaching Kimball, Nebraska, formerly known as Antelopeville, he took the exit, eyes peeled for a watering hole. At a white, otherwise nondescript, church, he noticed on the sign a chili cook-off coming on Sunday and an AA meeting every Tuesday at five o'clock. Having found much comfort over the years in the community of saints called Alcoholics Anonymous, he pulled into the gravel parking lot, turned off the car, and listened to the cooling motor pop and tick. He'd logged 20-some hours; he had another 25 to go. He took a deep breath. It was getting cold. It was Tuesday. The meeting started in three minutes.

Hold on to that modern-day wilderness story for a few moments.

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Lent can be called a wilderness journey. Today is the first Sunday of the Season of Lent. Lent lasts forty days not counting Sundays (which are little Easter celebrations). Long ago, the church agreed that Easter was such big news, Christians needed to prepare for it. So, the season of Lent was born to help us prepare. Intentional spiritual practices of fasting, reflection, the giving of offerings, penitence, and prayer mark the season.

Our forty days of Lent mirror Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. The number 40 in scripture generally is taken to mean a lot, umpteen, a whole heap, a bushel and a peck, (which is how much my parents used to say they loved me). Forty is a big number in the Bible. The rains fell on Noah and that ark how many days and nights? (40). Moses wandered with the Hebrew people in the wilderness for how many years? (40). Goliath challenged the Hebrews twice a day for how many days before David defeated him? (40).

We give things up in Lent to remember what Jesus gave up for us. Conversely, we make room in our lives for spiritual practices because we are spiritual beings; Jesus reminds us in his wilderness that we do not live by bread alone. We intentionally change our routine in Lent to reorient our lives to our walk with Jesus. We might add something in Lent. We might listen more and talk less. Instead of giving up TV, we might watch films with our family and talk about them theologically. Lent can be a lens through which we see life differently, more thoughtfully, more prayerfully.

The season of Lent is marked, also, by ashes. Do you remember in Milos Forman's film *Amadeus* the court composer Salieri had heard Mozart's amazing music but he had not met Mozart yet. At a ball where Mozart was to attend, Salieri walked through the rooms looking at faces of people he didn't know wondering who might be Mozart. He wondered if Mozart's pure musical genius would show on his face. (What a great movie.)

On Ash Wednesday we find Christians by the ash on their foreheads. We began the season last Wednesday on a day called "Ash Wednesday." (Eric Corbin produced an amazing service of worship.)

What do ashes mean to you?

- Ashes remind us of our morality, our finitude, our limits.
- Ashes remind us of our sin. Ashes, like sin, get everywhere. When the Trade Center Towers came down, it wasn't the stone, or fire, or twisted steel that threatened the children in the preschool of Trinity Episcopal: it was the ashes. The ventilation system had sucked in all the ash and dust, and the children couldn't breathe. Teachers wrapped wet towels around the children's faces and they escaped single-file down the canyons of Wall Street.

The world is filled with sin: my sin, your sin, our sin . . . The ashes remind we have become dirty with sin. So we pray, "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy."

- Ashes remind us of the work God calls us to do in the world. When I was a commissioner to the General Assembly of our denomination in 1986, Rev. Ben Weir was elected moderator. For 30 years he had been a PCUSA missionary in the Middle East, most recently in Lebanon, where he had been kidnapped off the streets of Beirut and held hostage to 16 months, 14 of which were in solitary confinement.^[1]

Through the entire ordeal, his wife Carol never ceased to urge everyone to pray for all the people in the war-torn country, including Ben's captors. Years later, Carol gave this definition of what Christian "mission" is.

"Mission includes some aspect of consciously chosen struggle. In mission we open ourselves up to the reality of the world and we pray for the grace to enter deeply into human suffering . . . [W]e will not enlarge the . . . gospel by adding old and new dogmas. We will enlarge [the gospel] by adding the world."^[2]

Dag Hammarskjold, former United Nations General Secretary, put it this way: "the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action." Ashes remind us of the work God calls us to do in the world.

- Ashes in the sign of the cross remind us our hope.^[3] In the days when the AIDS crisis was full blown, women in my church began a relationship with an AIDS network (Regional AIDS Interfaith Network, based in Little Rock). Often, people living with AIDS had become ostracized from their family and network of friends. And many lived and died alone. The congregation where I served as pastor was partnered with a great man named Bill. Our ladies brought him potato soup and other foods that he could eat. Near the very end of his life, I said to him one day, "This must be hard."

I wasn't sure he heard me. Those were his last days when he was in and out of sleep. He woke up and gazed at me with a surprised look, like he couldn't believe I was missing it. He closed his eyes and smiled. Then he told me how beautiful these days were. The woman at our church were taking such good care of him. All his life he wanted to belong, but he never felt he did. He always wanted to be himself, but he felt he never could. And now he did feel like he belonged. And, finally, he could be himself.

It was a miracle of God, he said.

It was a miracle of God, indeed, and his young pastor (me) had missed it. (In adult Christian Education you are studying God's big grace in small things, right?)

Our ashes in the sign of the cross remind us of our hope in Jesus Christ who overcomes estrangement with welcome, despair with joy, loneliness with community, death with eternal life.

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We are making our way with ashes on our heads. And we are walking with Jesus in the wilderness. In the coming weeks Nicodemus will show up under the cover of darkness. Jesus will visit a Samaritan woman at noon. A blindman will share our journey briefly. Mary and Martha will greet Jesus with tears when he shows up and his friend, their brother, has. Died. On Palm Sunday we'll watch Jesus ride into the world's gravest dark. On Easter we'll seek the dead at a grace and find Jesus risen in light.

Today, with Jesus, we emerge from the wilderness. I don't know how difficult, or lonely the road for Jesus may have been when he was in the wilderness. But I know at the end he found welcome.

Scripture says that after his trial, after the fast, after the journey, when the devil left him, angels came upon Jesus and ministered to him. That is our hope in Lent, that God comes to us when we are at our lowest point, and that God will give us the care we need to be whole again, and wholly ready to serve in the world that God so loves.

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And that story I began with, about our friend dying for a drink in a modern-day wilderness of temptation and despair?

When our friend stepped into that AA meeting in Kimball, Nebraska, he found the coffee pot, threw a dollar into the basket, and helped himself. He found a place to sit. And he was made to feel genuinely welcomed; he so badly needed to be welcomed in the middle of the country, on a long, lonely journey, so far away from where he'd been, and so far away from where he was going. He needed to feel welcomed and he was welcomed.

Decades later he still spoke about what happened in Kimball, Nebraska. He still remembers that AA meeting where others took him in. There were a few retired men. There were a few farmers and cattlemen. A couple of young women with tattoos. An Episcopal priest who wore his collar and a shiny smile. A few housewives. Nineteen people—who just may have saved his life. *Angels all.*

Jesus knew the feeling. "Suddenly angels came and waited on him."

Ashes on this journey of Lent reminds me that sometimes we need an angel. Sometimes we need to be an angel for somebody else. May we experience both on our Lenten journey.

The Lord be with you.

AMEN.

[1] An Islamic fundamentalist group called the Islamic Jihad took credit for the kidnapping; it later evolved into Hesbollah. It is believed that Ben was freed in exchange for US anti-tank weapons, as part of the Iran-Contra Affair.

[2] See Carol's obituary: <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2010/12/17/carol-weir-dies-86/>

[3] Kayla Mueller, an American Aid Worker, was kidnapped in the Middle East in 2014 after leaving a Doctors Without Borders clinic. She was killed on or near February 5th, 2015, either by her kidnappers or by a Jordanian airstrike. She wrote a letter home in the spring before she died. That letter is widely available. This is an excerpt:

I remember mom always telling me that all in all in the end the only one you really have is God. I have come to a place in experience where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our creator b/c literally there was no [one] else . . . [B]y God [and] by your prayers I have felt tenderly cradled in freefall.

I have been shown in darkness, light, have learned that even in prison, one can be free. I am grateful. I have come to see that there is good in every situation, sometimes we just have to look for it. I pray each day that if nothing else, you have felt a certain closeness [and] surrender to God as well [and] have formed a bond of love [and] support amongst one another ...

. . . Please be patient, give your pain to God.