

Sermon for Ash Wednesday
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
February 17, 2021
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath

This year, many churches are grappling with the question of how to impose ashes to mark Ash Wednesday.

The liturgical use of ashes originated in the Old Testament times. Ashes symbolized mourning, mortality, and penance. Job (whose story was written between the 7th and 5th centuries B.C.) repented in sackcloth and ashes (Job 42:6). Prophesying the Babylonian captivity of Jerusalem, Daniel wrote, "I turned to the Lord God, pleading in earnest prayer, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes" (Daniel 9:3). After Jonah's preaching of conversion and repentance, the town of Nineveh proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, and the king covered himself with sackcloth and sat in the ashes (Jonah 3:5-6). These Old Testament examples evidence both a recognized practice of using ashes and a common understanding of their symbolism.

Jesus Himself also made reference to ashes: Referring to towns that refused to repent of sin although they had witnessed the miracles and heard the gospel, Jesus said, "If the miracles worked in you had taken place in Tyre and Sidon, they would have reformed in sackcloth and ashes long ago" (Matthew 11:21).

In the Middle Ages (at least by the time of the eighth century), those who were about to die were laid on the ground on top of sackcloth sprinkled with ashes. The priest would bless the dying person with holy water, saying, "Remember that thou art dust and to dust thou shalt return." After the sprinkling, the priest asked, "Art thou content with sackcloth and ashes in testimony of thy penance before the Lord in the day of judgment?" To which the dying person replied, "I am content." In all of these examples, the symbolism of mourning, mortality, and penance is clear.

Eventually, the use of ashes was adapted to mark the beginning of Lent, the 40-day preparation period (not including Sundays) for Easter. Since the Middle Ages, the Church has used ashes to mark the beginning of the penitential season of Lent, when we remember our mortality and mourn for our sins.

In our present liturgy for Ash Wednesday, we use ashes made from the burned palm branches distributed on the Palm Sunday of the previous year.

But what happens when we can't use ashes to symbolize our mourning, mortality and penance? So many churches are using interesting and creative methods this year. Some churches are sprinkling ashes from a distance on people, some are handing out postcards with the image of an ash cross on it. I love the creativity this pandemic is forcing us to have.

As you know, I have decided not to impose ashes this year out of safety concerns. But what has really been speaking to my heart is the fact that we are already covered in ashes from this last year. We need only look at the ashes we carry in remembrance of all who died since last Ash Wednesday.

- 488,000 people in the United States have died from COVID in the past year.
- That number jumps to 2.42 million worldwide.
- On January 8th, 5 people died when a pro-Trump mob tried to take over the Nation's capitol, including a Capitol Policeman
- 44 people were killed in the US last year for being transgender
- Fatal police shootings among Black Americans was much higher than that for any other ethnicity at 226 black Americans in 2020
- 47,511 people died from suicide last year
- In the last year, this congregation has lost loved ones, including Tom, Clint, Pat, Mayo, Patricia, Judith and Bill to name a few.

My point is that, regardless of whether we impose a smudge on our forehead or tote around the simulacra of an ash cross on a postcard, we already carry these ashes of mourning, mortality and penance on our shoulders, our heads and hands all the time. As we begin this holy season of Lent in preparation for Easter, we must remember the significance of the ashes we carry: We must mourn and do penance for our sins. We must again convert our hearts to the Lord, who suffered, died, and rose for our salvation. We must renew the promises made at our baptism, when we died to an old life and rose to a new life with Christ. Finally, mindful that the kingdom of this world passes away, we must strive to live the kingdom of God now and look forward to its fulfillment in heaven.