

There is a 1973 motion picture titled *Ash Wednesday*. It stars Elizabeth Taylor. Taylor plays an aging woman who wants to return to the heights of her beauty. In pursuit of this obsession, she boards a plane to Switzerland, where she undergoes extensive plastic surgery. The doctors promise her that afterwards she will look twenty years younger.

Following the surgery, with her bruised face wrapped in bandages, Taylor dons dark sun glasses and decides to go for a walk. Slowly, in great pain, she strolls the streets of Geneva. Seeking a place to stop for rest, she enters an old stone church.

"Hidden in the back row of the sanctuary, she is like a new woman waiting to emerge from a gauze cocoon . . . until she is approached by an elderly priest making his way through the congregation. It is Ash Wednesday. And carrying his bowl of cinders he pauses in front of Taylor and intones the ancient litany . . . 'Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return.'" (1)

Talk about a reality check. Seeking to look a few years younger, and the ancient liturgy reminds you that any improvement, no matter how striking, is but temporary.

This is how Lent begins with a reminder of our mortality "Dust to dust and ashes to ashes . . ." For forty days leading up to Easter we assess our lives 40 days because that's how long Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, how long the Jews were in the desert. It is a time of preparation. During this time we ask ourselves what is really important in our lives. Religious people are often accused of indulging in escapism. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are the only people who deal with the really important things in life. That is what Lent is all about. And it begins with Ash Wednesday.

Ash Wednesday reminds us of our mortality.

In the Garden of Eden, after Adam and Eve eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God says to them, "Dust thou art, and to dust thou shall return."

That's part of the symbolism of the ashes which we shall place on our foreheads this night. It is a reminder of our mortality. We like to fancy that we shall live forever. Some day we shall. But not in this world. This world is but a fleeting image of the world that is yet to come. Ash Wednesday puts it all into perspective.

Of course, the subject of our mortality is not a popular one. One man named John knew it was a difficult subject to bring before his aged mother, but he felt that he must:

"Mom," he said, "you're no longer a spring chicken and you do need to think ahead of what'll happen in the future. Why don't we make arrangements about when . . . you know . . . when . . . you pass on?"

The mother didn't say anything. She just sat there staring ahead.

"I mean, Mom," he continued, "like . . . how do you want to finally go? Do you want to be buried? Cremated?"

There was yet another long pause. Then the mother looked up and said, "Son, why don't you surprise me?"

Death is a difficult subject. We would prefer to disguise it, ignore it, pretend it doesn't exist. And never do we want to admit that it can happen to us.

Most of us prefer the attitude of comedian Woody Allen: "I don't want to live on in the hearts of my countrymen," he once said, "I want to live on in my apartment."

Ash Wednesday is a reminder that this isn't possible. It is a reminder of our mortality. "Dust thou art, and to dust thou shall return."

It is also a reminder that we are flawed creatures. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," writes Paul Rms 3:23.

A man who had been in an accident. "There's nothing wrong with me," the man says. "But sir, you've just been in a terrible car accident," a bystander says. "You're bleeding and have some deep bruises. There may be internal damage!"

"There's nothing wrong with me!" the man argues.

"At least have a doctor check you out, sir. We have an ambulance right here it wouldn't take very long . . ."

"I told you, there's nothing wrong with me!"

"But sir . . ."

Then the man walks away from the car accident. His wife picks him up and drives him home. Later he dies from internal bleeding.

"There's nothing wrong with me," can be a dangerous thing to say. "Spiritually, it is probably the worst thing a person could possibly say. For a person to stand before God and say, 'There's nothing wrong with me' that's incompatible with Christianity, and unacceptable to God." (2)

We are flawed creatures. Every one of us and the amazing thing is that even when we are aware of our flaws, we often refuse to let go of them.

There's the story about a boy who jumped on the bumper of his Dad's truck in order to hitch a short ride across the yard. His Dad didn't see him.

The truck hit a bump and the boy accidentally slipped down the bumper and was being dragged for several yards before his dad heard him screaming.

The father ran around behind the truck where his son was still holding on to the bumper. He could see that he was not seriously hurt. Still, the boy's knees and legs were scraped up pretty badly. The father asked the obvious question, "Why didn't you let go?"

That's a question which God our Father will probably one day ask us. Why didn't you let go of your bad habits? Let go of your pride?

Let go of your fear? We place the ashes on our forehead as a reminder that we are mortal creatures and that we are flawed creatures.

However, the news is not all bad. There is another side to Ash Wednesday.

Ash Wednesday reminds us that we are creatures who have been redeemed. That is why St. Paul writes in our Epistle for the night, "We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.." This is the greatest need that a flawed, mortal creature has: to be reconciled to God.

"We are the only religion in the world whose God gets hurt, whose God gets stabbed, who writhes in pain on a cross, who gets whipped, who has five wounds in his body, and who shouts his pain in the midst of his suffering . . . , 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me and let me suffer like that?' What other religion is there where a cross becomes a throne? His suffering was not imaginary, it was not make believe, it was not fake. The cross tells us that." (5)

There is a Lenten drama in which a young boy is working in his father's carpentry shop in Jerusalem. He is assisting his dad in building a cross.

At one point in the drama the boy is weeping. "What is wrong?" his father asks.

He responds, "I went to the market place and I saw Jesus of Nazareth, the teacher we love to hear, and he was carrying the cross we made in our shop! They took Him to Golgotha and nailed him to our cross."

His father insists, "Oh no, son, that wasn't our cross. Other people in Jerusalem build crosses. That wasn't our cross."

"Oh yes, it was!" says the boy tearfully. "When you weren't looking, I carved my name on the cross that we were making. When Jesus was carrying his cross, he stumbled right beside me, and I looked, and my name was on his cross!"

Ash Wednesday reminds us that each of us constructed the cross on which Christ died. We are mortal creatures, we are flawed creatures, but by the cross of Jesus Christ we have been redeemed. We have been reconciled to God.

That is the Good News of Ash Wednesday. We wear the ashes to remind us of our mortality and of our many flaws. But we also wear them to remind us that because of what God has done in our behalf through the death of His Son, we have been redeemed.

Most of you are familiar with the name John Wooden. John Wooden was the legendary coach who led UCLA to national prominence in college basketball. It is said that Wooden always maintained his composure no matter what happened on the court.

A reporter once asked him how he managed to keep his cool under the great pressure of coaching college basketball. Wooden reached into his pocket and took out a wooden cross.

"When the pressure is on I hold that cross in my hand," he explained. "Not as a good luck charm. I just hold it there to remind me that there is something more important than basketball." (7)

That is what Ash Wednesday and Lent are all about. To remind us what is really important in our lives and in our faith. As we place the ashen cross upon your forehead this evening, let it be a reminder to you that you have been redeemed. "We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

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1. <http://home.netcom.com/~jealsup/ash6e.html>.

2. <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/what-is-lent-for-ash-wednesday-don-schultz-sermon-on-cross-agony-42857.asp>.

3. *Be Rich* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1976), p. 61.

4. <http://aardvarkalley.blogspot.com/2005/09/holy-cross-day.html>.

5. http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/palm_passion_passion.htm

6. Vincent Patton, Erika Lundborn, and Teri Vinson, eds., *These Days: Daily Devotions for Living by Faith* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2009). Cited in Landon Winstead, *Redefining Success* (Kindle Edition).

7. The Timothy Report, <http://www.timothyreport.com>.