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Lent



The Season of Repentance and Renewal
Fullness of Time series



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The Fullness of Time

SERIES PREFACE

ESAU McCAULLEY, GENERAL EDITOR

Christians of all traditions are finding a renewed appreciation for the church year. This is evident in the increased number of churches that mark the seasons in their preaching and teaching. It's evident in the families and small groups looking for ways to recover ancient practices of the Christian faith. This is all very good. To assist in this renewal, we thought Christians might find it beneficial to have an accessible guide to the church year, one that's more than a devotional but less than an academic tome.

The Fullness of Time project aims to do just that. We have put together a series of short books on the seasons and key events of the church year, including Advent,

Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. These books are reflections on the moods, themes, rituals, prayers, and Scriptures that mark each season.

These are not, strictly speaking, devotionals. They are theological and spiritual reflections that seek to provide spiritual formation by helping the reader live fully into the practices of each season. We want readers to understand how the church is forming them in the likeness of Christ through the church calendar.

These books are written from the perspective of those who have lived through the seasons many times, and we'll use personal stories and experiences to explain different aspects of the season that are meaningful to us. In what follows, do not look for comments from historians pointing out minutiae. Instead, look for fellow believers and evangelists using the tool of the church year to preach the gospel and point Christians toward discipleship and spiritual formation. We pray that these books will be useful to individuals, families, and churches seeking a deeper walk with Jesus.



I

Facing Death, Finding Hope

ASH WEDNESDAY

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

RECITED DURING THE IMPOSITION OF ASHES
ON THE FIRST DAY OF LENT

All lives end. Black lives and White lives, Asian lives and Latina lives, the young and the old, men and women. Some will die terrified to their last moment. Some will pass away in deep pain and anguish. Others will say their final words surrounded by loved ones who quietly chant the Psalter. Some will die in elder care centers, alone and forgotten. We die in a thousand different ways, glorious and mundane. It's the universal characteristic of the human condition.

Yet we push death and its signals away. We dye our gray hair, trade in glasses for contacts or vision surgery, and

add a mile or two to our runs. We do all we can to ignore death's presence or wish it away, including hiding the elderly and infirm from sight in nursing homes and hospitals. But death is coming and we must face it.

Paul refers to death as “the last enemy to be destroyed” (1 Corinthians 15:26). He says that when the Messiah defeats death, his people will say, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55). But until we have been raised from the dead and death has been swallowed up in victory, it still stings and wounds. I carry the deaths of my father and the two children we lost to miscarriage in my heart. I carry the deaths of Black boys and girls lost to police violence and gang brutality. We carry the deaths of innocents all over the world with us. Let's tell the truth. Death hurts.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? ASH WEDNESDAY

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, a service known for the imposition of ashes. As clergy mark the foreheads of the faithful, we tell them, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” We tell them they are going to die.

I remember serving as a priest on Ash Wednesday after I was married and had small children. Kids get excited

about everything in church that's different from the norm, so the idea of coming down the aisle to receive something new thrilled them. Instead of Communion they got their foreheads marked with ashes. I experienced something far from excitement or joy. I looked at my wife and two young children and told them words that broke me. I told them they would return to dust, and as a symbol of that returning, I marked their foreheads with ashes in the shape of the cross.

In the Bible, ashes are a sign of mourning and loss. When Xerxes issued a command to kill all the Jews in his kingdom, the Israelites responded in the following way: "In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes" (Esther 4:3). The link between mourning and ashes is well established in the Scriptures (see Daniel 9:3; Jeremiah 6:26; Job 42:6; Matthew 11:21).

The liturgy makes a second connection as well, one that goes beyond the symbols of repentance found in biblical depictions of mourning. It takes us back to the origin of all our pain. Ash Wednesday evokes the punishment arising from the fall, when God says to Adam and Eve,

“Dust you are and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19). In other words, the sadness of Lent is not a general sadness about the inevitability of death but an explicitly Christian diagnosis of the cause of death. We sin and die because humanity rebelled against God. There is nothing natural at all about death. It is an alien intrusion into the good world God created. It is an enemy to be defeated. On Ash Wednesday we remember that we will die, but we do not accept it as the inevitable reality of the human experience. Even in our acknowledgment of death there are hints of our rebellion against it.

We sin and die because we are born in the aftermath of the rebellion of our first parents. Adam and Eve rebelled because they wanted to be like God and were led away by their desires (Genesis 3:5-6). They believed the serpent’s lie and disobeyed God’s command (Genesis 3:13). This rebellion had implications that spread out in multiple directions, including engendering a new distrust of each other (Genesis 3:7) and of God (Genesis 3:8-9).

Through the imposition of ashes, Ash Wednesday reminds us that death and sin cannot be completely separated. This does not mean a particular form of death is punishment for specific sins, but sin and death are partners.

But if the ashes of Ash Wednesday point us toward the link between sin, death, and rebellion, they also contain something else, something more important than everything we have seen thus far. The ashes are in the shape of the cross. That cross carries within it an entire story and the foundation of human hope. It is the story of loss and gain, of the incarnation of the truly good one, his glorious life and triumphant defeat of death. The ashes are not just a reminder of our great failure; they remind us of God's victory over sin and death through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son.

In the garden after our first great disobedience, God did not give an immediate death sentence. He spared Adam and Eve, and he clothed them (Genesis 3:21). God's grace stayed his judgment. The human story would go forward. God also made a prophecy about the offspring of the woman, saying:

I will put enmity
 between you and the woman,
 and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
 and you will strike his heel. (Genesis 3:15)

Christians have called this the *protoevangelium*, the first preaching of the gospel. Christ is the one born of woman who crushes the head of the serpent and brings about the salvation of humanity. The offspring of the serpent (the sons of evil) are at enmity with the sons of the light. The ashes on our forehead remind us that even as we continue our slow march toward death, we serve the one who has already defeated the enemy that stalks us.

THE PRAYER OF ASH WEDNESDAY

Lent is not about how angry God is with us for our sins. It is about a God who intervenes on our behalf to rescue us from our sins. This is why the collect for Lent in the Anglican tradition begins with these words: “Almighty and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made, and dost forgive the sins of all those who are penitent.”¹ The focus on penitence, fasting, and confession can lead us to believe that God needs to be appeased by us or that he will accept only a groveling and miserable humanity. Behind that false belief is the idea that a life of sin is better than life with God. The only downside is that sin brings judgment. In this view, the Christian is one who has reluctantly given up their sins to avoid judgment.

But this is not so. Life with God contains the good, the true, and the beautiful. God's call to repentance is a call to give up those things that can bring only death. Ash Wednesday calls us to remember death, and by calling us to remember death it calls us to remember what causes death: sin and rebellion. By forcing us to remember our sin, it helps us realize that, at bottom, our sins are lies about the true source of joy.

There's a reason the second part of that first collect of Ash Wednesday focuses on contrition: "Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."² Contrition is about recognizing that our sins are just that—means by which we have fallen short of the glory of God. We cannot run from them until we recognize the danger they pose to our spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being. This is not something we can do by ourselves. As humans we too easily believe the lies sin tells us. That is why God must create in us new and contrite hearts. The feeling of sorrow for our sins is itself a grace.

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The glorious thing about this collect, and all the prayers of Lent, is that they presume a loss of zeal. Over time we get comfortable in our sins. They become a part of who we are, a portion of the spiritual architecture of our lives. They are a limp we get used to walking with. Ash Wednesday (and Lent) is a call to remember our first love, the pursuit of holiness that may have marked the first years of our journey with God. Sin must become repulsive again. We need new hearts set aflame with love for God.

The logic of this prayer is not strictly soteriological. It's true that, in the end, God will forgive us of all kinds of sins of which we are unaware. Grace will triumph. But this prayer shows us we cannot be healed of sins we refuse to acknowledge. There is no greater joy or relief than to know we are forgiven by God. The first step in receiving that forgiveness is seeing our sins for what they are. In order to do that, we need hearts that are made new over and over again, because untended our hearts grow cold and unresponsive. We need the help of the Holy Spirit to show us the ways we have failed.

Lent, then, is about facing our failures. But we do not encounter a God who begrudgingly forgives our sins despite his better judgment. The apostle Paul says God is

“rich in mercy” (Ephesians 2:4). This phrase evokes the divine name God revealed to Moses when he asked to see God’s glory. God told Moses he was “the LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). Instead of becoming a source of despair, our sin becomes the arena of God’s glory. He doesn’t have barely enough grace to forgive us. He is rich in the stuff; it overflows from his very nature. Ash Wednesday invites an introspection that leads to an acknowledgment of our sin that collides with an explosion of God’s grace. No step in this process can be skipped.

THE SCRIPTURES OF ASH WEDNESDAY

Traditionally Ash Wednesday has included a reading from Joel. To ward off God’s judgment (described in Joel 2:1-2), the prophet calls on the people to fast:

Blow the trumpet in Zion,
declare a holy fast,
call a sacred assembly.
Gather the people,
consecrate the assembly;
bring together the elders,

gather the children,
those nursing at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room
and the bride her chamber.
Let the priests, who minister before the LORD,
weep between the portico and the altar.
Let them say, "Spare your people, LORD.
Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn,
a byword among the nations.
Why should they say among the peoples,
'Where is their God?'" (Joel 2:15-17)

Joel's hope is not in the fast itself but in God's character as the one who is "gracious and compassionate" (Joel 2:13). In other words, Joel says that if Israel is destroyed, God's purposes and ability to fulfill his promises will be called into question. Therefore God must forgive the people. Fasting, then, is not about us earning God's forgiveness; it is about reminding ourselves through our fasting of our radical dependence on God. The fasting that begins with Ash Wednesday is caught up in the process of remembering our sins.

But it would be wrong to sidestep the reality of God's judgment that hangs over Ash Wednesday, Lent, and

fasting. Yes, God is gracious to us. But beneath that statement about grace is a reminder of what sin is. Sin is rebellion against God, and that rebellion brings judgment. Lent demands that we remember that the day of the Lord (to steal the phrase from Joel) is “a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.”

It is good news that God judges sin, because sin harms both individuals and societies. The sins of greed and lust lead to the exploitation of women, children, and the vulnerable. The sin of racism leads to the harm of Black and Brown people in this country. The sins of arrogance and pride put us above our fellow humans. The sin of idolatry gives our hearts over to something other than our Creator. The sins of gossip and slander create lies that destroy lives and communities. God is gracious, but if we find ourselves caught up in the multitude of sins that lead to the harm of ourselves and others, we are on the wrong side of God, and that is a dangerous place to be. Lent reminds us of our danger.

The Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday highlights Jesus’ own teaching about fasting and charity:

Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:1-6)

Jesus highlights the dangers of fasting and other ceremonies that surround repentance. Before we begin this season, we must remember who it is for. The potential for self-deception is high. Any season of fasting or charity can turn into religion as performance instead of a service offered to God. I know some who look at the pomp and ceremony of liturgical churches, with our ashes on our

heads visibly setting us apart, and see in us a violation of Jesus' commands. We should be fasting in secret. How can we reconcile a secret fast with a public Lent?

Those who engage in a season of fasting must take this criticism seriously. Isaiah too speaks about fasting for show. In his day the people fasted, but God seemed to pay no attention (see Isaiah 58:2-3). Isaiah says God isn't paying attention because the people are exploiting their workers and engaging in violent behavior during their religious fasts (Isaiah 58:4). The ritual of fasting hasn't touched them as persons. It hasn't led to a change in their lives. The prophet tells the people there is a kind of fast that God honors:

To loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke . . .
to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter.
(Isaiah 58:6-7)

Isaiah doesn't condemn the people for engaging in public acts of repentance. There are numerous accounts

of public penance in the Bible. The people of Nineveh covered themselves in sackcloth and ashes and fasted in response to the preaching of Jonah. The problem isn't that it is public; the problem is that it is *for* the public. Isaiah and Jesus make points that are much more subtle than we give them credit for. Both speak to the human heart, and getting to the bottom of its mystery is complicated. Any act can be directed toward God or other people. Jesus calls on us to examine our motives. If the problem is with our hearts, merely avoiding rituals won't save us from danger. We can make a show of *not* fasting or engaging in public acts of charity because we want people to know we are not like the legalists who do such things. In other words, there is no safe place to hide from the possibility of self-deception.

Nonetheless, discretion matters. Part of the discretion we display during Lent is trusting that rewards from God may be invisible. If we make a show before people, they reward us with respect and status. Rewards from God are designed to make us into people whose lives reflect him in the world. So, yes, we mark our heads with ashes—public shows of piety are not in themselves evil. But we must guard our motivations and do most of our spiritual

work in private, because the privacy of those acts reveals (if only to us) our dependence on God.

The private acts Jesus calls for include acts of mercy toward the needy. In much the same way, Jesus' first sermon recorded in the Gospel of Luke highlights God's concern for those who experience injustice (Luke 4:16-30). Ash Wednesday, then, reminds us of one of the things it is easy to forget during the course of our journey with God: the stepped-on people of the world. They are the people whom Black theologian Howard Thurman called "the disinherited," those with their backs against the wall. Our journey toward God over the forty days of Lent includes a journey toward the suffering, because that is one place where God can be found (Matthew 25:34-46). Lent is not merely about extended reflections on our own mortality. It's a chance to open our lives and hearts to the pains of the world in imitation of our Lord, who looked with compassion on those with spiritual and material needs.

ASH WEDNESDAY: A LITANY THAT TRANSCENDS OUR MOMENT

Another distinctive element in the Anglican Ash Wednesday service is something modern prayer books

call the “Litany of Penitence.” A litany can simply be a list, like a litany of complaints. In church context, it refers to a series of prayers, often with a congregational response. The Litany of Penitence focuses on areas of sin we confess together at the beginning of Lent. It doesn’t mean we are necessarily guilty of all these sins in the moment, but that at certain points in the year (day, week, month) we have failed in a wide variety of ways. The Litany of Penitence articulates the corporate failure of the church, and all our individual failures are caught up in that failure. It is an opportunity to examine ourselves.

The thing I love about this litany is that it transcends our current culture wars. Some Christians are highly focused on issues of justice. They love it when the litany says, “For our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty; Accept our repentance, Lord.”³ This is a clear lament for the ways we allow structural injustices to linger because we are indifferent. This is well and good, but the litany isn’t finished. It also speaks to personal holiness: “Our self-indulgent appetites and ways, and our exploitation of other people, We confess to you, Lord.”⁴ According to the liturgy, holiness matters. The litany also recognizes that we have failed in our devotion

to God: “Our negligence in prayer and worship, and our failure to commend the faith that is in us, We confess to you, Lord.”⁵

The litany doesn’t condemn our ideological opponents and leave us feeling vindicated. A love for justice absent a love for God is empty. A love for God absent concern for our neighbors is a false witness. Love for God that doesn’t pursue holiness misunderstands the freedom from sin inherent in the gospel.

The Litany of Penitence is an opportunity to meet ourselves and stop being dishonest about the things we have done. As an example, I like to lie about my physical condition. I find the friendliest mirror and the most generous lighting. But to find the truth, I step on the scale and see where I really am. The Litany of Penitence is a good scale that analyzes our spiritual fitness, not for the sake of condemnation, but so we know which areas need the most work.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Ash Wednesday is not a beginning, properly speaking. Even if, like the ancient converts to the faith, you’re entering Lent as a preparation for baptism—you’ve heard the good news and decided to answer God’s call—Lent is

nonetheless an opportunity to reflect on the beginning of your life with God. For everyone else it is a chance to renew our commitment to Jesus.

In either case, Ash Wednesday's focus on grace and repentance is a gift to us. But it is not the only gift Lent has to offer. In chapter two we'll consider other rituals and spiritual practices that mark the season.