

Ash Wednesday, Year B, 2009
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

Today we begin the season of Lent. I have always felt that the liturgy for Ash Wednesday is so powerful that it needs little help from the preacher. Lent is a season for reflection, recollection and introspection. In the process, we seek to know ourselves as God knows us, and with courage we seek to come to grips with what we find.

The season of Lent dates to the earliest years of the Church. The reason for its beginnings, the reason that it developed as it did and the reason that it has survived as a liturgical season is that the people of God need such a season. We need such a season to consider the reality of our lives in the light of the hope and promise of the Cross, in the light of Good Friday and Easter Day.

Lent gives us a time, forty traditional days of fasting and introspection, to honestly evaluate ourselves and place our shortcomings and failures in the hands of Jesus. That is all that Lent is for. It is a time to come to know ourselves and offer ourselves anew to Jesus. Lent is not a time for being holier than we normally are, a time for putting all our piety eggs into one seasonal basket.

Neither is Lent a time for impressing others with our symbolic fasting. This is what Jesus meant when he said, in the Gospel reading that we have for Ash Wednesday, to wash your face that your fasting may not be seen by men, but by God. The idea of practicing piety to impress men, or even to impress God, is absurd. How can we possibly impress the One who defines perfect Holiness with our imperfect piety? And, if we are not impressing God, why would we even want to impress others?

The symbols of Lent, the ashes, the color purple, the traditional fasts, in the good old days the absence of meat on Fridays, these things designed by the church to help us understand ourselves and prepare for Easter. They are the outward and tangible things that we can do to help us remember our state before God. They serve their purpose when they remind us of our mortal nature and our dependence on God for our salvation.

Amen.