

Ash Wednesday

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It's a parent's worst nightmare. You turn your back for a second, and your toddler wanders away and discovers a way to get up into that top bathroom cabinet where you keep all those little red and white pills that look so much like candy. Or somehow the childproof clasp on the kitchen cabinet door fails; the child peers into the darkness under the sink, and she chooses something bright and blue that looks so much like mommy's mouthwash. There are more than 300,000 cases of child poisoning a year. Surely there are some gathered here who've had to call Poison Control. Perhaps there are some here who have had to rush their child into the ER. If you are one of those parents, there is a good chance that the first thing that was given to your child was a substance called activated charcoal. It's a standard ER treatment. Activated charcoal is made from burning coconut shells and hardwood at a very high temperature. The resulting ashes are injected with steam and acid to create this incredibly fine powder. Charcoal does not break down in the digestive system, and because the powder is so fine, it can move through the whole system into all the little folds. A fifty-gram dose has the square-foot coverage of more than a football field. And as it moves through the system, the charcoal binds to the toxins and absorbs them out of the tissue so that healing can begin. Every day lives are saved by this black, burned powder.

For us in the Church, Ash Wednesday serves as the gateway into the season of Lent. In Lent, the Christian community is given space to acknowledge that we have ingested some things that are not good for us. We have opened up the dark cabinets that should have stayed closed. We have been tempted and we have succumbed and our systems have paid the price.

In Lent, we name the poisons in our bodies and minds, and we also name the poisons in our larger systems: our churches, our corporations, our governments. Some of us have been following the story of what happened to the people who live near the Flint River in Michigan. State officials took over the water management, and in a move to save money, they did not add a critical chemical to the river that would neutralize the naturally occurring high levels of chlorine. Subsequently, the chlorine corroded the old pipes, releasing trace amounts of lead into the city's water supply. Hundreds of kids began to get sick. Most of those affected were families with little power and influence. Most of them were poor. Most of them were people of color. People accustomed to ingesting trace amounts of systemic injustice for generation after generation.

On Ash Wednesday we come together to say that we, as a people, have made a mess of things, and it is only through the infinite mercy of God in Christ Jesus that we have any hope to set things right. Last week, a small group of us gathered here at church for the annual burning of the palms. We took out the old palm branches from last year's Palm Sunday Procession. If you remember back to that procession, these were the palms that we waved as Jesus entered Jerusalem. If you remember back to that day, we play-acted people in the crowd—people full of hope that we had a Savior who was going to fall in line with our agenda. "Praise God in the Highest for

the Savior who will conquer our enemies, bring us national glory, bring us personal prosperity, who will 'Make Jerusalem Great Again.'” Of course, when that Savior turned out to be a fraud, hanging limp in the sun, mumbling for water mixed with hyssop, we dropped our palms and walked away. Disgusted. Embarrassed.

After last year’s service, the branches from our play were put away in a dark church closet. Last week, the small group who gathered took those dried, brittle branches, and we burned them at a high temperature to create a fine, grey ashen powder. And this morning, the other clergy and I stirred those ashes together with oil blessed for anointing. In just a moment all will be invited to come forward. The pastor will dip a thumb into this thick, black slurry and draw a small cross on the center of your forehead.

That ashen mark is an ancient sign of humility and mortality. But that ashen mark is also a bold proclamation that the cross of Jesus Christ is the only true antidote to the poison in us and in our world. The cross of Jesus, the ultimate sign of God’s suffering, non-violent love, is our only hope of deep healing. In the cross, Jesus absorbs the sin of the world. In the cross, we are offered a love that can move through the folds of any person, through the pipes of any city, through the psyche of any nation. A cleansing love that binds to our sin and offers the forgiveness necessary to let it go. To make amends. To start again. With that ashen mark on our heads, we proclaim that even our brittle palm branches, even our failures, our hubris, our contempt, even our most toxic ways of death can be consumed in the fire of God’s love and used for our healing.

What are those things in our lives today that are poisoning our personal systems, keeping us from flourishing? What are those toxins that continue to flow through the larger systems in our community? May this day we open ourselves to God’s infinite power for healing in Jesus and his cross.