

A Homily Preached by the Rev. Carole Johannsen
Grace Episcopal Church – Ossining – New York
Ash Wednesday – March 2, 2022

If you lived in New Orleans, especially if you lived in the French Quarter, you would be cleaning up today. As you undoubtedly know, the wild celebration known as Mardi Gras ended last night after not just days, but weeks of partying. New Orleanians begin celebrating the Mardi Gras *season* on the Feast of the Epiphany, the Twelfth day of Christmas, January 6th! On that day, the Christmas decorations come down to be packed away, and the traditional green, gold and purple of Mardi Gras come out to drape the city. You see them everywhere: in sashes over doorways; in the cheap beads given away free everywhere, in store windows, even on buses. It's *Carnival*, and the Crescent City comes alive!

I discovered the extent of Mardi Gras when I was in New Orleans for a conference and a visit to an old school friend who lived right on Bourbon Street in the French Quarter. Even in the two weeks I was there, I could see and feel the season building in intensity. As it does every year, it would culminate in the frenzied party known as *Mardi Gras*, or "fat Tuesday" just before Ash Wednesday, but given its momentum, and its complete take-over of the city and its people, plus the thousands of visitors it draws to the French Quarter every year, I wondered how on earth it could stop at a certain, designated time.

I asked my friend. "Oh, it's easy," he said. "Early Wednesday morning, the police go through the French Quarter saying, "It's Ash Wednesday. Go home now. It's Ash Wednesday. Go home now."

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I have never heard better advice for the beginning of Lent! With the change of one word, it's advice we should repeat to ourselves over and over on this day:

It's Ash Wednesday. Come home now.

For all of us who are overstuffed with the world: devastated by violence, squashed by the pandemic, concerned about the future, Lent comes just in time to remind us that we were created for better things.

It's Ash Wednesday. Come home now.

It's time to come home to the One who blessed us into being, the One who sent us into the world to spread love, the One who grieves for us when we suffer, the One who worries about us when we stray and waits impatiently for us to return.

It's time to come home to our deepest selves—the spiritual selves that yearn to be in communion with God because that's how God created us to be. We are not complete when we are separated from our Creator.

One theologian wrote in The New York Times that "On this day, people can openly gather to grieve together." I think he's right.

... We do not grieve for Jesus - that comes on Good Friday.
... We grieve for ourselves, and our lost opportunities.
... for times when we could have loved our neighbor, but didn't;
... for ways that we could have nurtured the best in ourselves, but lacked the courage to do so;
... for sacramental moments when we could have touched God, but instead walked away, preoccupied or indifferent.
... for what we've done, or left undone.

This is the beginning of the season of hard questions and repentance. This is the time to ponder the subject of forgiveness from every angle.

- ... Have we hurt others? Do we need their forgiveness?
- ... Have we refused to forgive when others have hurt us?
- ... Do we really believe that God offers us complete forgiveness? Do we block God from healing our souls?
- ... Do we consciously work to make this church a church of reconciliation, where people can come in their grief and sinfulness and be accepted and loved and invited into deeper relationship with God?
- ... Do we devote ourselves to making the world that God so loves a place of justice and mercy, as Christ commissioned us to do?

If you can honestly claim that none of the above applies to you, then you can go home now and be excused from Lent. But most of us desperately need to forgive and be forgiven. This, now, is the time to kneel together, and pray together. These forty days make up a tithe of our year. I encourage you to offer them to God for God's work. Devote them to reconciliation with God and with one another and to deepening your relationship with God.

The dirty, gritty ashes we receive on our foreheads this day are meant to remind us of our need for forgiveness. They are but a token of the early Christian tradition of wearing sackcloth and dumping ashes over your whole head and going about that way all during Lent to demonstrate not only your sinfulness, but your repentance and desire for forgiveness.

And these ashes are meant to remind us that the flesh we hold so dear is nothing more than a collection of cells that will, one day, no longer hold life as we know it. Those cells will one day be dust, no doubt about it. Our only hope for life beyond the dust is in relationship with God through Jesus Christ. How foolish we are when we allow sinfulness to diminish that relationship. How foolish we are to waste even a moment of life, separated from God.

The Christian writer, Frederick Buechner, offers these questions as a sort of self-evaluation for the start of Lent:

When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see there that you most deplore?

If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in 25 words or less?

Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you happiest?

If tomorrow were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?

And finally, if you had to bet everything you have on whether there is a God or whether there isn't, which side would get your money? Why?

On a personal note that comes back to me every year on Ash Wednesday: In 1996 I was the interim rector at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Monroe, CT. My husband, Peter, came to the Ash Wednesday service and as I did with you today, I imposed a cross of ashes on his forehead. The following May he died, and in October of that year we buried his ashes at St. James' Church in Danbury.

Do not waste this time! Do not waste this time!!

We are dust, and to dust we shall return. But our spirits are immortal. Our spirits belong to God. Tend to the things which are God's.

It's Ash Wednesday. Come home now. Amen.

Readings Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21.