



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

This Is The Way

Sermon preached at the Noon service, February 17, 2021

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

There is always a strangeness about this day. It is not like any other day I can think of, really. Good Friday may be close. Because Good Friday is also a walk into the valley of the shadow of death, but on Good Friday it's not our *own* death we contemplate. It's Christ's death. God's only Son is crucified; he suffers, and dies. A deeply tragic and painful experience for believers but, still, it doesn't happen to us; it happens for us.

But Ash Wednesday? On Ash Wednesday we contemplate our *own* mortality. On this day we're invited to remember something we don't wish to remember. A fact so disturbing, we spend a large part of our lives trying to deny it: "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Remember.

Remember you're a living organism who will die, who will dry up; who will be swept away. Remember, now. Don't forget. Don't ever forget! Don't forget you are impermanent. Don't forget you are temporary, finite, a passing, transitional being on the journey between your birth and your death. Remember. But why? Why should we remember? Why would we want to remember?

Inventor Stephen Jobs, months away from dying from the pancreatic cancer that eventually took his life, observed, "Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything—all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important."

The prophet cries, "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children..."

This is why we remember. This is why we look so directly into the mirror of our mortality. It is so we will recall what is *truly* important to us. It's been said we don't remember the days, we remember the moment—the moment of your first kiss; the moment you truly embarrassed yourself; the moment you knew what you really wanted. All time is not created equally.

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near.

So this moment, Ash Wednesday, this particular day in time, is given as an invitation to remember what is truly and fundamentally important: “by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy word.”ⁱ

These are the tools we’ve been given to “observe a holy Lent.”

- We examine ourselves and ask hard questions.
- We repent of the things we have done wrong.
- We ask forgiveness for the hurt we have caused the ones we love.
- We pray deeply, and in prayer we reconnect with the Source, who is God.
- We fast and we give up things that dull our senses and take away our focus.
- We study and read and meditate on the word of God and, we recover the ancient wisdom.

This is how we do it. This is how it has been done for thousands of years, and this is how it will be done for thousands more. Nations will rise and fall, change will continue at its astonishing pace, and still the faithful will continue these ancient practices, some so old they almost seem antiquated. Repentance? Fasting? Self-denial? These are some of the oldest tools in the box! Yet, in reclaiming these ancient practices, we will rediscover ourselves as God has made us, as God has created us to be.

In the lesson we heard from The Gospel According to Matthew, Jesus explains precisely how we should use these tools. He teaches us precisely how we should give and how we should pray and how we should fast. Let these remain mysteries no longer to the Christians of the modern era. We have been instructed.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann wrote, “In ancient Israel the symbolism of ashes was understood to be a forceful reminder of the pervasiveness of human sin and of the inevitability of human death. Ashes represented that which, in the human experience, was burned out and wasted, that which once was but is no more. The traditional emblem of grief and mourning has been adopted by the Christian church as a signal of our own sinful mortality; it has also been embraced as a muted trumpet to warn us of the coming dark days in Jesus’s life; his passion and death.”ⁱⁱ

We will not need the ashes this year to remind us of what is burned out and wasted in our human experience. We do not need ashes to remember what we have lost. We have the taste of ash and sackcloth in our mouths. The muted trumpet has already sounded.

There’s a character in a Stephen Carpenter novel who says, “People always talk about how hard it can be to remember things—where they left their keys or the name of an acquaintance—but no one ever talks about how much effort we put into forgetting. I am exhausted from the effort to forget... There are things that have to be forgotten if you want to go on living.”ⁱⁱⁱ We, all of us, have exhausted ourselves in trying to forget. Still, the ancient Christian way suggests the things we wish to forget must first be fully remembered in order to be forgotten; they must be recalled and confessed for them to be forgiven. And then put in their proper place.

The apostle Paul, in some of the most powerful words in the New Testament, attempts to describe what it’s like to follow this ancient way, “We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed;

as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

This, this is the way. And this, this is precisely what we prepare for as we enter the season of Lent.
AMEN.

ⁱ *The Book of Common Prayer, 1979 Ash Wednesday Liturgy* p.264-265

ⁱⁱ *Texts for Preaching, A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year B*, by Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, and James D. Newsome. Westminster/John Knox Press, (Louisville, KY) c. 1993, p. 182

ⁱⁱⁱ *Killer, (A Jack Rhodes Mystery Book 1)* by Stephen Carpenter, ebookamazon.com, c. 2010

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For information about St. Bart’s and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022