

SERMON TITLE: "The Meaning of Ashes"
SERMON TEXT: Leviticus 6:1-11 and Luke 10:1-13
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: February 10, 2016—Ash Wednesday—at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

On Monday when my husband Steve and I were outside looking at all the smog, I said it looked kind of like a windstorm had blown the dirt off the mountains into the air. Steve said he thought it looked more grey than brown. Whatever color you call it, there are definitely unhealthy particulates in the air this week. With the burning ban in effect, it's good that Gary Phillis burned a lot of palm branches last year and had plenty left over for us this year. It's also good that we bought this little pretend firepot for last year's Camp Discovery Vacation Bible School. This pretend fire on our altar allows us to imagine a campfire, or better yet, the altar fire that the Old Testament priests used to cook and burn their sacrifices to God.

The Jews stopped burning sacrifices when the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple in the year 70 AD. Christians never did practice a tradition of burning sacrifices. But here we are, 20 centuries later, using ashes on this first day of the Lenten season. So, tonight, I thought it would be good to talk about why we do this. What is the meaning of the ashes?

1—CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE OF SIN

The first and most obvious meaning of the ashes is confession and repentance of sin. In the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10, verse 13, Jesus denounced some towns that rejected the good news that he and his disciples had tried to show and tell them. "Woe to you, Chorazin!" said Jesus. "Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes." Wearing scratchy, itchy sackcloth and dumping ashes upon one's body were old-fashioned signs of serious repentance. The people who did such things were clearly aware and confessing that they had done something wrong. They were deeply sorry. They

made their bodies miserable as a means to demonstrate to themselves, to God, and to anyone else who was watching that their ways had been unacceptable. You could say that they felt so badly that they were groveling in ashes.

We might wonder why biblical people wallowed in ashes, instead of just dirt. I'm guessing it had to do with their lifestyle. In a time when your floors were made of dirt, and dirt was everywhere you lived, worked, walked, and played, dirt wasn't anything special. Everyone was dirty! If you wanted to show that you were sorry for what you had done, you had to be more dramatic. So they used ashes.

Today, most of us heat our homes with natural gas, and very few of us have much recent experience with indoor fires. So camping is probably the only time we actually cook over a wood fire, and most of us probably don't even do that. One of my earliest memories of ashes comes from the Mary Poppins movie that was popular in my childhood. Despite Dick van Dyke's happy-go-lucky portrayal, chimney sweeps were certainly close to "the bottommost rung" of the "ladder of life," getting soot not only all over their clothes and skin, but also in their lungs in deadly, cancerous quantities. If we want to get imagery from a movie, we might also recall Cinderella, the story of a girl whose oppression included the filthy and menial chore of kneeling down next to the fireplace to clean out the cinders.

Maybe if the Old Testament laws were written today, they'd use the imagery of emptying out the dusty vacuum canister or cleaning out the kitty litter box. I love my cat, but I would have to be feeling very, very sorry to situate myself down on the floor next to the kitty litter box for any length of time. Whether sitting in ashes or placing them on our foreheads, the symbolism is a very lowly and sorrowful act of confession and repentance of sin.

2—REMOVAL OF GUILT

A second meaning of the ashes is removal of guilt. We see this in Leviticus 6:1-11. These verses instructed the ancient Israelites what they were to do when someone committed fraud or robbery or any other kind of economic sin. The guilty one was to pay back the victim of that crime in full, plus 20%.

Then the perpetrator was to take a guilt offering to the tabernacle or temple. The offering was to be a ram without blemish, or its equivalent. The priest would then burn the animal on the altar until it was reduced to ashes. Then the priest would take the ashes outside the camp, removing all traces of the guilt from the holy altar, so that the confessing and repentant person could be purified of sin. That last part, the disposal of the ashes far, far away might have been as important as, or even more important than, the burning of the animal itself.

Thousands of years later, when we're feeling guilty for something we've done, we don't go to all the trouble and expense of burning a sacrificial animal. In so many ways, that just seems wrong. But that symbolic meaning of the ashes is still with us today. When we place the ashes of burnt palm branches on our foreheads, we're not only confessing and repenting for a variety of sins. We're also hoping to remove that guilt from our lives. We want the bad feeling to go away and we want the reality of sin to go away as well. We want the promise of Psalm 103:12—that God removes our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west. Rather than continue to dwell on what we've done wrong, and beat ourselves up over it, this ritual gives us a chance to purge the whole mess from our hearts and minds. We're depending on God to take our sin outside the camp, to make our guilt go away.

3—PURIFICATION THROUGH JESUS

A third meaning of the ashes for us today is the purification we receive through Jesus. As Christians, when we apply the ashes to our foreheads in the sign of a cross, we're connecting them to the sacrifice of Jesus' life. We Christians receive our purification not from burnt bulls, or even burnt palm branches, but through Jesus himself. As Hebrews 9:13 says, "For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who . . . , offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!"

Jesus' body wasn't burned up, but, in Christian tradition and theology, we have compared his execution on a cross to the Jewish practice of offering animal sacrifices. These sacrificial offerings weren't made because God was bloodthirsty and required them to satisfy some divine need. No. The sacrifices of unblemished rams, goats, bulls, and heifers were done because the handing over of something so expensive, so valuable, was a sign of the person's intense desire to receive purification.

When we Christians put the ashes on our foreheads in the sign of a cross, we're acknowledging the value, the preciousness, and the sacredness of Jesus' life. We're claiming our purity not through what we do, but through Jesus' act of taking our guilt outside the camp, to the graveyard, to the tomb. In the Christian story, Jesus willingly becomes the bottom-rung guy who sweeps the chimney

and the oppressed stepdaughter who has to clean out the fireplace cinders. Jesus is the one who humbly kneels down in the ashes, who scoops out the fire pit of our sins, who gets down in the dumps of our cinders, and who empties the dirty residue so we don't have to. Through Jesus' acts of love and forgiveness, we receive cleansing and new life. The meaning of the ashes is that we receive our purification through Jesus.

CONCLUSION

One of the TV shows I've been watching lately is *Chicago Fire*. The characters in that program are firefighters who often put their lives at risk in order to rescue someone from a burning building. They often come out of the situation with black soot on their faces. Frequently, the fires have been set maliciously. Someone is definitely guilty of sinful actions, and things of value have been reduced to ashes. Through the sacrificial actions of the firefighters, the people inside the buildings are extracted from the dangerous flames, putting a safe distance between the victims and the ashes of the horrific ordeal. The paramedics are on the scene too, providing purified oxygen to their lungs.

Like a television drama, the ashes we use on Ash Wednesday tell a story. It's a story of humble and lowly confession and repentance. It's a story in which valuable things get burned up and guilt is

removed. And it's a story that has allowed Christian believers to find purification through Jesus. As you come to receive the ashes on your forehead this evening, I hope that you will claim, for yourself, the meaning of the ashes.