

Meditate on Psalm 51.

When I opened my morning devotion today, I was again reminded that today was Ash Wednesday. But it didn't feel like it at first. After all, this year is different. Even more so than last year. There are no palm branches from last year's Palm Sunday to burn for the ashes. Again, there will be no gathering together to receive the ashes and remember once again just how fragile human life can be. There will be no physical reminder that in the end we are all equal, that death comes to us all. There will be no gathering or formal service.

Some churches are doing a drive-thru. Other churches will do a simple online version. One church I know about mailed ashes to its members. But it won't be the same. But then again, maybe it doesn't have to be.

As I considered all of this, I realized that being in the same room has nothing to do with Ash Wednesday. Gathering is important, but it doesn't change this Holy Day. Ash Wednesday has nothing to do with sitting in the sanctuary or any accoutrements, candles, or written words. It is about our hearts. Today is about our relationship with the Giver of Life and the One who allows death to claim us at the end of our days. This one church Holy Day is the one Holy Day that we can only truly experience alone. Even if we are in a crowded room.

Ash Wednesday forces us to face our humanity, our frailty. It brings to the forefront that death comes to us all. Death can only be faced alone on the human side of the world. No one can walk it with us. Yes, someone can be with us right up to that final moment when that last fleeting breath has dissipated. But in the end, we cross the barrier of death alone.

When we have confronted that stark reality of life that has been true since Adam and Eve were thrown out of the garden, we are reminded that we are never truly alone. God always walks with us. Even in those moments when we feel the most alone, God is still right there. And at the moment when death finally embraces us, God is right there. As He always has been.

Ending gives way to beginning. Sin gives way to redemption. Finality gives way to possibility. Despair give way to hope. Sickness gives way to healing. Death gives way to life. Before we can know resurrection, we must first taste of death. Before we can truly embrace the fulness of God's love, we must first embrace the frailty of our humanity. That is what today is about – embracing our mortality.

Until today, I thought that the powerful song, "[Because He Lives](#)," was an Easter song. Now I realize it is a perfect song for Ash Wednesday. It embodies what the day is truly about. It's words have touched my heart and soul in a myriad of ways. But the depth of it never struck me so fully than how the words touched my spirit today. As I listened over and over to different singers prayerfully sing these profound words, my soul was strengthened, my spirit uplifted, my weariness dissipated, my hope flourished, and my whole being gained a new peace.

In the end, it doesn't matter today that we don't have "official" ashes in front of us or on us. In the end, it doesn't matter if we are in-person at church or listening to a broadcast. In the end, all that really matters is how is your relationship with God and are you spending quality time with Him today.

Ashes or none, gathered or alone, what matters most is being with God. One day we will all cross life's river, fight life's final war, breathe life's final breath. But we are assured that death gives way to victory in the lights of glory enveloped by the perfect, unending love of God.

– Pastor Jan

From the Book of Common Worship – An Ash Wednesday Prayer

Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth: Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence, that we may remember that it is only by your gracious gift that we are given everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.