

## Ash Wednesday

Sermon February 6, 2008

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St. James' Episcopal Church, Potomac, MD

Tonight on this Ash Wednesday, my mind goes back to a scene from Thornton Wilder's play, "Our Town" which has always had a very special meaning for me. It's a classic drama about the passage of time, and how life is never truly appreciated while we're living it.

I especially remember the scene of a young mother, Emily, who has died nine years into her marriage while giving birth to her second child, and is allowed by the play's stage manager to relive a day in her life. She chooses her twelfth birthday, one of the happiest days she can remember.

As the day unfolds, however, Emily's excitement turns to disillusionment. She feels no joy in watching herself with her father and mother and her little brother Wally, as the day is wasted with trivial preoccupations. She cries to her mother: "just for a moment we're happy. Let's **look** at one another!" But they don't. Then pangs of remorse fill her—her life, just like the lives of her family members and her neighbors, was never really savored either. It was lived in self-centeredness and petty occupations, and then gone.

The play is set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the truths it expresses are timeless. Maybe you've seen it on stage or on TV: Thornton Wilder reinforces the truth that our hopes and despairs and loves begin and end not with things, but in the mind and soul, as our lives unfold through one another.

The play is humorous, philosophical, and profoundly moving. It helps us understand a truth that can be hard for us, about who we are and what we are doing with our lives—failing to truly appreciate life as we're living it. That truth is hard, but it can be hopeful.

In a few moments ashes will be rubbed into our foreheads and you will hear the words, "Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return." We are all going to die, tonight or sometime, but whatever it is, our time on life's playing field is pretty brief. We tear through our lives doing more and more, setting unrealistic expectations of ourselves, deferring time and again the time when we really think we might start to live.

Remember the song "Cats in the Cradle"?—"when you coming home, Dad?" —"I don't know when but we'll get together then, we'll have a good time then.." We say "as soon as—things settle down, as soon as I saved enough for retirement, then I'll do this and that—like time with my family, my church, my friends. Emily could find the truth about that in a play where she can re-live her twelfth birthday, but that was in a play. This is real life.

The ashes we receive on our foreheads are intended to be a funeral for our real life pretenses, our fantasies that we can press on forever, and that if we keep pushing we will achieve the peace we are looking for. What the play “Our Town” teaches us about your death and mine is that we are ultimately not in control. Death tells us that all we have is *today* *And*.

So the truth is if we are really going to live, we have some work to do. After the ashes are rubbed on our foreheads we will say together Psalm 51. We will pray, “Wash me through and through from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin.” To look at our lives in God’s light is to see how subtle and persuasive is our self-absorption.

And as we pray the Litany of Penitence it probes our lives to reveal that shadow side we rarely look for. We’ll pray, “We confess to you Lord, all our unfaithfulness: the hypocrisy and impatience of our lives...our self-indulgent appetites and ways...”opening up the infection of our souls so that we can be healed.

Yes, Ash Wednesday opens up some hard truths, that we are going to die, and that we have failed to live the lives we were made for. But if Ash Wednesday stopped there we would just go home jarred awake and perhaps more troubled. But it doesn’t stop there. It finds its completion as we gather at the altar to receive Christ’s body and blood. The table will be spread for us, and we will come with open hands, just as we are.

If we are honest we know that we are incapable of living life as fully as we should, or undoing the sin that binds us. But there is a truth beyond the hard truths about our life and death: we live and love because we are loved by the One who hung on a Cross for all that we face tonight and the nights to come.

This is the Lord who holds all of our failures in the wounds of his love. This is the Lord that we will meet at the altar tonight. And so the ashes and sin will yield to bread and wine, the food of a healing love that will work in us for the journey of Lent ahead. So, in Emily’s words from the play “Our Town”, let’s really look at each other, while we live, while we have time.

Yes, it’s true, we’ll have a history-making early Easter this year, on March 23, and that means we’re here tonight beginning an early Lent. While we have time, let’s make the most of it, with ashes, repentance, and sharing Christ’s Body and Blood with one another.

Yes, an early Lent can be hopeful for us. Who knows?—it might even lead us into the bright Early Easter that we yearn and pray for, and that we need so much.

AMEN!