

Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 103; Psalm 51; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Ash Wednesday A; 02.22.23; G. Miles Smith+

It is easy to have a moment when we might think that being smudged by *ashes*...is a bit *macabre*...some kind of weird *medieval* thing that modern people have surely surpassed with more refined ways. Who needs ashes anymore?

After all, we live in a culture that tells us we are blessed when we are *independent*,...*powerful*...have an attractive social media presence (if you are into that), and that we basically *have it all together* (and if we don't then we know how to fake it). We want to be that kind of person.

But Ash Wednesday *isn't* interested in any of that. For a little while we get to do something completely counterintuitive for us: *to let our fragility be revealed*.

Humans in our very nature are *dependent*...and *imperfect*...with *unpredictable bodies*...and *unpredictable spirits*. We need others more than we even realize perhaps. We very likely have made more *mistakes* than we care to remember. We have certainly had to think about our physical vulnerabilities more in the last few years than in a long time. We can be weighed down by unspeakable concerns for ourselves or someone we love.

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In a strange way, Ash Wednesday should offer us all *a sigh of relief*.

You can even take a deep slow breath right this moment...

We don't have to pretend...at least in these next moments together.

For today, we practice "counter-cultural truth-telling"...*as we blatantly have our fragile selves...revealed with ashes...before the altar of God*.

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This simple act of *ashes* is how we begin the season of Lent...whether we are *participants* or *witnesses* this day. And it is fitting because the first step in any recovery plan--or any kind of healing at all--is admitting the truth of our life *as it really is*.

And we may do so today as we are upheld by *an even greater truth*...as we are called...to rely...on the steadiness of God's unending love and compassion...a Savior who never despises our fragility...a God who made us exactly this way...and who knows the ashes of our lives.

Only this God...*can breathe fire*...into our ashes. Only this God *blesses* the fragile...the poor in spirit.

For theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.