

Ash Wednesday, February 18, 2015, Year B

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, Ga.**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Rector

Scripture: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

***"Lent"***

I know that this question is circulating amongst Christian Churches – especially those who do not observe today: What exactly is “Ash Wednesday”? Where does it come from? It is obviously not in the Bible. But some of its ideas are. Ash Wednesday began in the early Christian Church – somewhere between the sixth and eighth centuries. Originally, the idea was that a Christian, as a sign of his or her repentance, would sprinkle ashes on their head.

In Holy Scripture, ashes were always associated with humility and mortality, about fasting, repentance and remorse. You have all heard the term “*sackcloth and ashes?*” In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus spoke of this form of humility – that was practiced for a long time, spoken of in the reading from Isaiah – written over 600 years before Jesus was born, we also hear about it in Daniel and Esther: “*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in **sackcloth and ashes.***” (Matthew 11:21) If you had sinned against God, and you felt remorse about that sin, and you wanted to turn away from that sin, from that behavior, then a person would sprinkle ashes on their head as a sign of sorrow and repentance. Ashes were supposed to remind you that you were mortal, that you will eventually become ashes after you die. We’re only ashes, and we need to repent of our sins now while God gives us a time of grace. I think it is important that we understand two terminologies: the first is “grace.” Have you ever received a gift that you didn’t ask for, and you certainly didn’t deserve, but you got it anyway? Grace is a gift from God that we don’t ask for or we don’t deserve. And then of course there is “mercy.” Mercy is NOT getting what you deserve! It is so important to understand that the hundreds of times that we hear the term “mercy” used in Scripture that it is about not getting what we deserve, and thank you Lord that He is a merciful God, and He sent His Son that we are NOT getting what we deserve! The words that are spoken today as the ashes are imposed: “*remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*”

During 6th or 7th centuries, Christian churches thought about integrating the idea of sackcloth and ashes in the liturgical year. People, in private, at times, would sprinkle ashes on themselves as a sign of repentance. Eventually, this became a public practice. Instead of sprinkling the ashes on your head, the ashes would be rubbed onto the forehead in the shape of a cross as a sign of repentance, and a reminder of your baptism, when the sign of the cross was placed on you with water and the Word. The ashes would actually be taken from the palm branches from Palm Sunday, burned the year before. I had the privilege today of mixing up the ashes from this congregation, mixing it with holy anointing oil, that way it doesn’t get all over your clothes. We will be using those in just a few moments. Some churches today have retained this practice, while others have let the practice go. In the Anglican Church, we honor this practice and use it as we begin our season of penitence – Lent. This season is a time of preparing our hearts and minds for the holiest week of all – and the remembrance of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross – in our place on Good Friday. (Talk about NOT getting what we deserve!) Please remember, it is not whether you have ashes on your forehead – what is important is what’s going on in your

heart, what's going on in your soul, and in your relationship with the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Lent is a forty day span of time from now until Easter. During this time, we focus on Christ's battle with sin and Satan that he waged in order to win for us our salvation. **The 40 days of Lent do not include Sundays, because Sundays' are considered a "reminder of Easter," a time of joy and celebration of Christ's resurrection.** It is up to you – if you have decided to give up chocolate kisses for Lent – you may have some on Sunday. But, again it is up to you – you may wish to avoid them altogether during Lent – until Easter Day.

Right after Jesus was baptized, three of the four Gospels tell us that Jesus went out into the desert to fast and to be tempted by the Devil for 40 days. For Jesus, those 40 days were a time of solitude, of introspection. Let's not forget that Jesus, although being God, was also man, and when you hear that He fasted for 40 days and 40 nights – that is quite a feat! A time when he battled the temptations of the Devil and emerged stronger than He had been before; again it is the man Jesus that became stronger by resisting temptation – and we know that He never sinned! For us, Lent is a time when we make that journey along with Christ. We think about our own temptations, our sins, and we repent. You'll notice that we are using the color purple, a color always associated with repentance in the Christian church. After these 40 days, we hope to emerge stronger than we had been before, and our Altar Guild will deck the church in lilies and in white – and we will all be celebrating.

Lent is a time for each of us to evaluate ourselves in light of God's Word. It's a time to abandon the baggage of sin that you have been carrying in your life. It's a time to receive God's forgiveness and strength to lead your life for and with Christ. It is a time to receive God's mercy – "not getting what you deserve!" It's a time to renew your desire to serve God, and to be the person that God has made you to be.

As part of this season of Lent and our own self-examination – please ask yourself - are there sins you have committed in your life that you feel you have now been forgiven of? Take a close look: are there sins you have not forgiven yourself of? (You know that you have been forgiven by God – but you cannot bring yourself to forget and forgive yourself.) Let me ask this reflective question –

- **Who are you when no one is looking?**
- What kind of person are you?
- Where do you need forgiveness in your life?

Take time this Lent to look at yourself and recognize your sins -and then look to Christ. Before Jesus became a man, He looked out over the world and saw all our sin, and He was saddened by what He saw and so Christ Himself stepped into time: Scripture tells us 600 years before He was born "*And He saw that there was no man, and was astonished that there was no one to intercede; then His own arm brought salvation to Him, and His righteousness upheld Him.*" (Isaiah 59:16) Please listen to the battle gear that Christ wore for us: "*righteousness like a*

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*breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head; and He put on garments of vengeance for clothing and wrapped Himself with zeal as a mantle." (Isaiah 59:17)*

Lent is that time when you do some “spring cleaning” in your soul. You look deep within and acknowledge your sins (every one of us is a sinner – and don’t anyone ever tell you that they have never sinned) and then look to Christ, who won the battle for you, and receiving His forgiveness –which He won for you on the cross. I would hope that Lent is a time when you grow in your appreciation of all that Christ has done for you becoming more aware of your sins, but also becoming more aware of just how much your Lord Jesus loves you!

The last part of Lent, is leaving that sin behind at the foot of His cross. It’s a very difficult thing to do sometimes – to stop a certain sin and to leave that sin behind. These next 40 days, what I would like to suggest you do - is this: If you want to give up something for Lent, give up a half hour a day! Fr. John – what do you mean by that? Here’s the prescription: during that half hour, **read a half a chapter a day from the Gospel of John every day – just a half a chapter** – it will take you 40 days to do it. Read the verses slowly, and think about the words you are reading, and then do a “checkup from the neck-up,” a self-check. Reflect on your sins, and then rejoice in Christ’s forgiveness and mercy. You know where you will be toward the end of the Gospel of John? You will be reading of the crucifixion, and Christ’s resurrection, as God prepares you. Let God strengthen you through His Word this Lenten season. Reflect on God’s goodness and mercy! Let God help you to “quit that certain sin” you want to be rid of in your life. This Lent - may it be something you do, not just these 40 days before Easter, but that you do it throughout your entire life.