

“HOT COALS IN THE ASHES”
Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2009

In our modern world ashes are a nuisance. Ashes are the polluted leftovers from industry. I still remember the terrible smell of wet ashes after the fire in Lissa’s apartment building years ago. In a previous house we had a huge fireplace which was usually full of ashes, hard to cleanup, smelling up the living room. Most of the time, when we’re home, we heat our current home with pine and aspen, as most of you do. It’s a really good stove, very efficient, but the ashes are always flying all over the place.

Ashes are a painful reminder of the horror of the Holocaust, the disaster of the Challenger space shuttle, the tragedy of 9-11. Not only are ashes a nuisance to clean. They cling to the mind in memories of evil.

It was not always so. In less high-tech ages, ashes meant there had been a warming fire, a cooking fire, a light-giving source of security. Fields were burned to make room for new crops. Ashes were used to make cleansing soap, to tan animal hides for use as shelter, clothing, tools, and furniture. Ashes were useful, a symbol of life, of hope.

Yes, ashes were also used as a symbol of repentance and mourning in the Bible, but never in despair. Mourning one’s sins and repenting in dust and ashes was to turn away from the sin and turn toward a God of mercy and forgiveness, a God who never broke the covenant. Repenting in dust and ashes was to remember that we are created out of dust and ashes, and to dust and ashes we shall return, except for the grace of God who made us also in the divine image, and offers us eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The early church used ashes as a symbol of repentance and reconciliation of the sinner to the fold. Lent was a time of internal inspection, of turning away from a life of ignoring God to a life directed by God. Our reading from the prophet Joel calls us to the necessity of genuine repentance of the heart, the will,

the whole person, prompted by the very character of God—gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.

Paul writes to the Corinthians that the goal of sincere repentance is to be reconciled to God through the loving death of Christ on the cross, and the time for that is now!

In Matthew 6 Jesus teaches us that the spirit of repentance is humility before God, trusting only in God’s observance of our piety and taking no thought of approval from our fellow human beings.

And so here we are back to the ashes. What do they mean in your life? Are you burned out? Do you feel blown about by winds of change? Is your life cluttered with yesterday’s ashes? Do you feel dirty inside, unorganized, unhappy, chaotic? Dig through your ashes. You may find hot coals.

We are a camping family, a tent camping family. We used to love to rough it. Now, not quite so rough is ok. One of my favorite parts of camping is the campfire. There is a magical power in that fire, a power that unites the family, drawing us all in closer. There is security in that fire. Even wild critters are not a problem when you can see them. There is warmth on a cold night. There is a transforming power in that fire—raw food is cooked, cold hands are warmed, fearful hearts are calmed. Sleep comes easily.

But the next morning can be shockingly cold. The newspapers are wet from early morning dew. And where are the matches??! They’re lost! Ahhh! It’s cold. My wife won’t get up and make breakfast until I get the fire started!

Bend down close to the pile of ashes, stretch out your hand. There is still warmth there. Carefully stir the ashes until you find the hot coals. Blow gently on the coals, add some dry sticks, and you have your morning fire!

Dig through the ashes of your life this Lenten season, and look for the hot coals. Look for the never extinguished power of God’s love in your life. The good news is always the good

news. Now, even now, is the day of salvation. In this Lenten season, blow upon the coals of your heart, and surrender yourself to the fire of God's forgiving love. Tear open your heart, not your clothes, and receive God's mercy, be reconciled, accept the Easter message on this Ash Wednesday. Let Christ be your new morning fire! AMEN!