



ASH WEDNESDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Wednesday, March 9, 2011

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I. Brief Historical Overview of Ash Wednesday

The use of ashes in the church left only a few records in the first millennium of Church history. The first Ash Wednesday that provides for sprinkling ashes in community rather than the individual acknowledgment of repentance occurred somewhere around 960. Near the end of the 11th century, Pope Urban II of the Roman Catholic Church called for the general use of ashes on what we now know as Ash Wednesday. It was not until the 12th century that the practice of ashes being created by burning palm branches from the previous Palm Sunday was implemented.

The Lenten Season

The season of Lent serves as our reminder of the redemptive and salvific acts of Jesus Christ. The Lenten season commences each year 40 days before Easter (excluding Sundays) with Ash Wednesday (also known as the Day of Ashes). The day serves as a reminder for Christians of our sinful nature and the reality of death while simultaneously asking us to recall the gracious nature of God.

On Ash Wednesday we participate in a worship service in which we include the ritual practice of the imposition of ashes. In some cases the ashes are a result of the burning of the palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday. The ritual practice of the imposition of ashes is paired with a reading of a portion of Genesis 3:14-19 in some churches. This reading again draws our attention to the weakness and failings of humanity as demonstrated by God's assertion, "from [the ground] you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19b).

Why ashes? The ashes are symbolic of our mortality and are placed upon the foreheads of those in worship in the sign of the Cross to remind us of the power of Jesus' sacrifice. In the Bible we are pointed to moments in which members of the community in ancient Israel expressed mourning and sorrow with ashes. In Job (2:8) he sits on ashes to express his mourning the death of his children. In Jeremiah 6:26 the prophet proclaims, "O my poor people, put on sackcloth, and roll in ashes; make mournings as for an only child, most bitter lamentations." Ashes in ancient Israel were an outward sign of mourning and repentance. In this day of penitence we begin again a journey of repentance before we acknowledge the glory of the Resurrection. As a result, before we celebrate Christ's glory we mourn the frailty of human existence.

II. Songs That Speak to the Moment

A. Hymns

"Walk Together Children" is a Negro spiritual arranged by Evelyn Simpson-Curenton. This song could be used during the invocation, the altar call, or before the pastoral prayer. During the Lenten season it is a call for unity and endurance; both of these qualities are lifted in today's texts.

Walk Together Children

Walk together children
Don't you get weary
Walk together children
Don't you get weary
Oh, talk together children
Don't you get weary
There's a great camp meeting in the promised land

Sing together children
Don't you get weary
Sing together children
Don't you get weary
Oh, shout together children

Don't you get weary
There's a great camp meeting in the promised land.¹

“Am I a Soldier Of the Cross” by Isaac Watts is a metered hymn also arranged by Evelyn Simpson-Curenton. It is a song about continuing the cause for Christ as a result of the grace that we have been given because of the sacrifices of Christ. This song could be played softly during the imposition of ashes.

Am I a Soldier of the Cross

Am I a soldier of the cross,
A follower of the Lamb,
And shall I fear to own His cause,
Or blush to speak His Name?

Must I be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease,
While others fought to win the prize,
And sailed through bloody seas?

Are there no foes for me to face?
Must I not stem the flood?
Is this vile world a friend to grace,
To help me on to God?

Sure I must fight if I would reign;
Increase my courage, Lord.
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
Supported by Thy Word.

Thy saints in all this glorious war
Shall conquer, though they die;
They see the triumph from afar,
By faith's discerning eye.

When that illustrious day shall rise,
And all Thy armies shine
In robes of victory through the skies,
The glory shall be Thine.²

B. Contemporary Gospel Songs

“Can't Give Up Now” by Mary Mary can be used anywhere in the worship service on Ash Wednesday. It addresses the need to persevere in life based on our relationship with Christ. It too reinforces today's text.

Can't Give Up Now

There will be mountains that I will have to climb
And there will be battles that I will have to fight
But victory or defeat, it's up to me to decide
But how can I expect to win If I never try.

I just can't give up now
I've come too far from where I started from
Nobody told me the road would be easy
and I don't believe he brought me this far to leave me

Never said there wouldn't be trials
Never said I wouldn't fall
Never said that everything would go the way I want it to go
But when my back is against the wall
And i feel all hope is gone,
I'll just lift my head up to the sky
And say help me to be strong

I just can't give up now
I've come too far from where I started from
Nobody told me the road would be easy
and I don't believe he brought me this far to leave me

[Hook:]

No you didn't bring me out here to leave me lonely
Even when I can't see clearly
I know that you are with me (so I can't)

I just can't give up now
I've come too far from where I started from
Nobody told me the road would be easy
and I don't believe he brought me this far to leave me.³

“I've Been Changed” by Karen Clark-Sheard can be used as either the sermonic selection or the invitational song. It deals with how we react to situations differently based on the change that occurs in us based upon salvation.

I've Been Changed

Yeah...well (I wonder is there anybody out there who's been changed).

(1st Verse)

Any other day I wouldn't have dealt with this situation this way. There were a lot of things I wanted to say but I thought about what would have happened if I let you get the best of me. No way. (No way) And now I can truly say.

Chorus:

I was a bird on the ground using my legs to get around. I was a piano out of tune but I've been turned around. Tell you how I know. Places I used to go I don't even go no more. 'Cause I can fly now. And the song I play lets me know I've been changed.

(2nd Verse)

Never mind what you've heard. I'm not the same. Somewhere, somehow, someway I reversed the way I do things. No it ain't worth all the tug of war with you to prove I'm stronger. I no longer stay to play and lose. Now I am proud to say it's true.

(Chorus)

Make no mistake about it. Anyone could change. But it takes a strong mind to say that doing the right thing is okay. And now that I've decided to give up these ways there's no turning back now. Now that I've found out I can overcome these things. Oh...

(Chorus)

III. A Prayer of Confession

Everlasting God we come before you humbly acknowledging our sinful nature;

We confess that we fall short of the calling of Jesus Christ each day.

We fail to love you in the failure to love and care for your people.

We ask for the strength and boldness to continue the mission of Jesus in the world.

We pray for the fortitude to set aside our own agendas and comfort in an effort to participate in the kingdom of heaven.

Gracious God, humble us, have mercy on us, and allow the Holy Spirit to abide with us, embolden us, instruct us, and ever bring to our remembrance the life and death of your Son.

Allow us to follow Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior in all that we do.

Amen.

IV. Testimony (Autobiographical Moment)

One of the greatest disservices that the church does to new disciples is to make it seem as though Christian life will be easier than any existence they had before they came to the knowledge of Christ. I remember making the decision to become a Christian in college. My conversion occurred in the midst of a personal crisis. It was a decision that I made because I felt as though I had nowhere else to turn in a particularly low moment in my life.

As a result, after I was baptized I quickly commenced in trying to divest myself from all aspects of the world that did not directly relate to my new Christian life. I attempted to purge myself of all things not completely sanctified as I then understood the word. As a continued on my faith journey I believed that my Christian self had to be completely separate from all other aspects of my life. As someone who had previously committed myself to works of justice in the world through social action and community service, I turned my energy away from these acts and began to focus on the Church. My journey into ministry became solely focused on the operation of the Church. My acts of graciousness were solely reserved for those individuals who subscribed to the same theological precepts that I held. It seems extreme but I believe that is the way that many of us operate; our world is the church world.

However, as time passed, I realized the importance of incarnational ministry—that ministry which calls us to care for one another (inside and outside the Church) in the same way that Christ cared for us. In order to carry out this ministry I realized that it was necessary for me to constantly be intentional about stepping outside of my comfort zone. I had to be willing to take radical, sacrificial action for the greater good. To be clear, my responsibility is not to be crucified, because that was the cross of Christ, not mine, but there must be moments when I find my own cross and pick it up.

When I think about the spirit of Ash Wednesday and the words of Paul, I now believe that true discipleship is understanding our insufficiency while acknowledging that Christ gives us grace and gifts in order to serve the world. We are to remember that the Kingdom of Heaven is both here and coming. As a result we must be constant participants in Kingdom actions. I repent for my early years of ignorance that led me to a narrow understanding of Kingdom ministry and look toward daily working in a variety of venues to make the world a better place in the name of Jesus.

As I reflect on my place in the world and in the body of Christ, I remember the words of Thomas à Kempis, “Jesus has many who love His kingdom in heaven, but few who bear His cross (Luke 14:27). He has many who desire comfort, but few who desire suffering. He finds many to share His feast, but few His fasting. All desire to rejoice with Him, but few are willing to suffer for His sake. Many follow Jesus to the breaking of bread, but few to the drinking of the cup of His passion. Many admire His miracles, but few follow Him in the humiliation of His cross. Many love Jesus as long as no hardship touches them. Many praise and bless Him, as long as they are receiving any comfort from Him. But if Jesus withdraws Himself, they fall to complaining and utter dejection.”⁴

V. Cultural Response to Significant Aspects of the Text



Dr. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

Mr. Nelson Mandela

Bishop Desmond Tutu

William McClain, a professor at Wesley Seminary, suggests through the events in the life of Jesus we see “indications of his entrance into a new kind of existence that transforms the present...this new existence is thought of in terms of time. It is a new age, which we now anticipate and in which we shall one day participate. Thus as we join worship in the present, with one hand we grasp the past and with the other we take hold of the future.”⁵

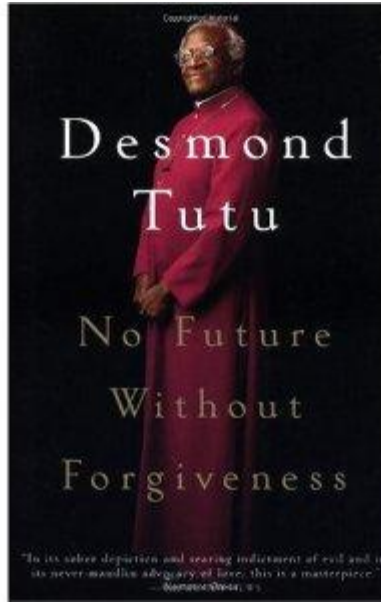
Ash Wednesday is a moment in the liturgical calendar in which we remember our morality and our sinfulness and we become reconciled through Christ. In 2 Corinthians Paul admonishes the reader “not to accept the grace of God in vain” (2 Corinthians 6:1). In order to accept the true nature of the grace of Christ, we must reconcile ourselves to God and to one another. As a matter of fact, our reconciliation with God is outwardly manifested through our reconciliation with others. One of history’s most pointed reflections of this reconciliation is in the story of South Africa in the wake of apartheid.



South Africa is a country that is overwhelmingly Black and yet the Black and Coloured (those people who have sub-Saharan African ancestry but not enough to be considered Black in South Africa) citizens of that country were oppressed for centuries. In 1948 the practice of segregation and subjugation were made legal. After enduring years of hardship at the hands of Whites, apartheid ended in 1993.

In 1993 South Africa elected its first Black president—Nelson Mandela, and Black people began to gain political control. The fear for many Whites in the country was that in the wake of this new political phenomenon, Blacks would seek widespread vengeance and would oppress Whites. However, the dynamics were quite different than what was anticipated.

While the situation in South Africa is far from perfect and there still exists very real economic apartheid, many would argue that there has been far greater reconciliation in South Africa as it pertains to race relations than in many other countries that have experienced similar situations of oppressions, including the United States. What is the secret behind the progress in South Africa?



Archbishop Desmond Tutu in his book, No Future without Forgiveness,⁶ speaks to the quest for reconciliation in the wake of apartheid. Bishop Tutu tells the story of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), formed to address the dark history of the crimes against humanity during apartheid. Rather than forcing the new South Africa to re-live the animosity of its past through a long drawn out process of unending criminal trials in a quest for retribution, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission gave victims the opportunity to give life to their suffering through telling their story and offered the accused the opportunity to speak to their actions. Tutu explains that letting victims and oppressors face each other with a new power dynamic framing their interaction fostered courageous acts of repentance, penitence and forgiveness that was symbolic of a new era and a new South Africa.

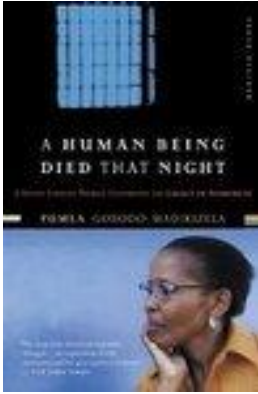
As a result, South Africa was able to acknowledge its past, while moving towards a new future. The difficult nature of this decision not to live in a space of vengeance speaks to Dr. McClain's concepts of a new time paradigm while recalling Paul's concept of "costly grace."⁷ In this way Black and Coloured South Africans "as servants of God... commended [them]selves in every way: through great endurance... beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger, by purity knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God..." to change. That is the spirit of Ash Wednesday the acknowledgement of the frailty of human life and suffering through the process of creating new life through repentance and redemption.

More Information on the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Hearings



1. See the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report. Online location: <http://www.info.gov.za/otherdocs/2003/trc>

2. See the Krista Tippet program, **Being**, an American Public Media Program. The March 22, 2007 broadcast features a great deal of information on the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The program provides images, stories, and tools for teachers. Online at <http://www.publicradio.org/program/truth/>



3. In addition to the book by Bishop Tutu, another good book to read for information about the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation hearings is [A Human Being Died that Night: A South African Woman Confronts the Legacy of Apartheid](#) by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela. She is a psychologist who served on the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Amazon.com product description for the book says: “An acutely nuanced and original study of a state-sanctioned mass murderer. Not since [Dead Man Walking](#) have we seen so provocative a first-person encounter with the human face of evil.”
4. For a website that contains information that can used in classrooms, non-secular and secular, see the Facing History website article titled “Transitional Justice: Reconstructing Self and Society.” Online location: <http://www2.Facinghistory.org>. The website contains information on the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Hearings as well as the hearings held after the Rwanda massacre, similar hearings held in Germany and elsewhere.
5. Borer, Tristan A. “Reconciling South Africa or South Africans: Cautionary Notes from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.” [Africa Studies Quarterly](#). (September 24, 2004.) Online location: www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v8/v8i1a2.pdf accessed 18 January 2010
6. Richardson, Clem. “Grim Truth and Tears in South Africa.” [The Daily News](#). 5 Oct. 1997.

VI. Sermon Aids

Popular Songs to Use

- “What’s Going On” By Marvin Gaye
On Ash Wednesday we are reminded of our sinful nature and of the redemptive nature of Jesus Christ. As we consider our sin in light of God’s grace we should be compelled to a life of service. Our service to others should model the service of Christ; it should be sacrificial and enduring. Gaye reminds us of the sins of injustice and destruction in the world and challenges us to do something to make a change.
- “Man in the Mirror” By Michael Jackson
“Man in the Mirror” reminds us that change in the world has to begin with us. If we are to

see the kingdom of God reign in this world we must acknowledge all that we have done wrong to contribute to the suffering and pain of others and make a change.

Sermon Illustrations

- **The Rent We Pay to Live on Earth**

In today's text Paul acknowledges the power of what God has done for humanity in the act of salvation through Jesus Christ. At the same time Paul challenges the church not to rest on salvation. We are challenged by the scripture to do more for others not out of some false sense of piety, not to be seen, but to remind people of the power of the grace of God. What does this mean?

Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm was the first African American woman elected to Congress and the first woman to run for the Democratic presidential nomination. Congresswoman Chisholm once said, "Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth."

Our service to others and our willingness to sacrifice for the greater good is not a reflection of ourselves but of the grace of God. On Ash Wednesday the Church is charged to commit to serve the body of Christ in the world, which is to sacrifice as a sign of repentance not as a demonstration of false piety.

- **Something Priceless: The \$250,000 Education**

I have three children, and my oldest soon went to Cornell—Ivy League. My second son went to Claremont—Ivy League. Now what happened was that I was the benefactor, and I paid twenty-seven thousand dollars a year for each of those boys. I have paid, not to mention cars and clothes and all the others things that go with going to college. So I am out of \$250,000 for two boys' education. I want you to notice that with \$250,000 I could have bought a degree. I could have said, "Here children, here is yours, here is yours, and here is yours. Here it is—you've got it." But the first day they go to work the boss would understand that they had bought a degree, but they don't know a thing about the job. I paid, and they studied. A hundred thousand is not too much if you do your work, because the benefactor has to cause the recipient to share in the sacrifice.

—Jones, Noel. "Do Something With It."

The African American Pulpit (Spring 2003), p. 55

We can only be reconciled to Christ and endure the Christian race if we are willing to endure all that the Christian journey provides.

Notes

1. Walk Together Children. By Evelyn Simpson-Curenton. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #541

2. Am I a Soldier of the Cross. By Isaac Watts. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #482 and #483

3. Mary Mary. "Can't Give Up Now." Thankful. New York, NY: Sony, 2000.
4. Thomas à Kempis. The Imitation of Christ. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003. p. 38.; PDF version online location: www.copticplace.com/files/imitation_of_Christ.pdf accessed 18 January 2010
5. McClain, William. Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990. p. 30.
6. Tutu, Desmond. No Future without Forgiveness. New York, NY: Doubleday Press, 1997.
7. Costly grace is a concept outlined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in The Cost of Discipleship. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1995.