

Ash Wednesday
St. Matthew 6:1-6,16-21
March 6, 2019
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

Metamorphosis

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Let's get ready for Spring! It won't be too far off now. 14 days away from today, just two more weeks of Winter to get through! Winter is sliding away. There are many signs that Spring is coming: Weather in the forties predicted for next week. Daylight Savings Time this Saturday. And Wednesday, March 20th is formally the first day of Spring!!

And here we are at the end of the spare, Spartan season of death and cold. Here we stand, gathered to commence the season of Spring-Cleaning. And we begin it with great hope and enthusiasm. We are motivated not only for a change of seasons, but also a change in our lives. Just as we are so done with winter, there are things in our lives we are also ready to be done with. And I mean Big Time! We want to enter into this Spring season with a healthier, happier, peaceful, and less anxious life. So we crawl into the cocoon of the 40-day Lenten Season tonight, ready to emerge at the end of these five and a half weeks as beautiful butterflies.

Why 40 days? In the early Christian community Lent lasted only 2 weeks long, beginning with Passion Sunday (now the Fifth Sunday of Lent) and ending with Good Friday. In the Eastern Christian Church, Lent was observed for the traditional 40 days, and the custom was later adopted throughout Christendom. Still, why 40 days, you wonder? Let us remember some history here:

- Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai with God (Exodus 24:18)
- Elijah spent 40 days and nights walking to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8)
- God sent 40 days and nights of rain upon the world in the great flood of Noah (Genesis 7:4)
- The Hebrew people wandered 40 years in the desert while traveling to the

Promised Land (Numbers 14:33)

- Jonah's prophecy of Judgment gave 40 days to the city of Nineveh in which to repent or be destroyed (Jonah 3:4)
- Jesus retreated into the wilderness for 40 days after his Baptism in the Jordan River

So 40 is a very special number. Five weeks is a serious commitment to change. If you are a mathematician you will also note that all the days in the season add up to more than 40 days, but few note that Sundays are not considered part of Lent, as Sunday is always a feast day, and add to that count the High Feast Day of the Annunciation to Mary (marking only nine months left to shop before Christmas) and then you get the forty days of Lent which are subtracted when you add all those together. So you ask, if Sundays are always feast days, what are all the rest of the days of Lent for?

And the answer is that Lent is a season of FASTING and PRAYER. To fast means to either not eat at all, as it is recorded that Jesus did in the Wilderness before he began his public ministry.

All of this is to say that you stand here at St. George's before God, about to enter the season of spring-cleaning. Yes it is a time to thoroughly clean your house up, but more importantly it is a time to do a spring-cleaning inside you, in your spiritual life. Your mission is to use these 40 days as a time of personal change. What you change is up to you, but I think I can safely say that each and everyone of us already knows something important that they need to change out in their lives. If you think Lent is only about changing your behavior for the next 40 days, then you have missed out on the opportunity that Lent affords, and the ship will sail without you. This is an opportunity God and your church is holding out to you to live a healthier, happier, peaceful, and less anxious life. This is a gift for you to live a holy life, in love with God, in love with others, and in love with yourself.

All the time I get emails from various retailers touting their sales, and how before midnight tonight I need to take advantage of them, or they will be gone tomorrow. Well I am sending you an email: This is an opportunity that you should take very seriously, because your time and opportunity to do so may come up short in the future. Advent always asks us, what time is it? Last fall we read a book together about time that emphasized and prompted us to see the value of today, this day in the whole scheme of the rest of your life. [20,000 Days and Counting, by Robert D. Smith] What time is it? What if today was your last Day? How would you live it? What if this was your last Lent? Again, how would you live it? Do not put off to

tomorrow what is of high priority to do today. Pick the change you want to make and pledge before God that you will do all in your power this Lent to change it.

And so it is appropriate this evening that we begin our spring-cleaning with a pile of dust and ashes. They are to remind us that we are but dust, and to dust we shall return. We like to think more of ourselves than that, but here we are calling you to face the cold, hard truth. You are formed of dust by God, and when it is time to leave your body, whether you are ready or not, no matter who you are, billionaire or pauper, saint or sinner, Sister Death is the great equalizer and to dust we will, we must return.

But what returns to dust is not the body which is to be, but the body which is, and with which we lamely identify most of the time. We are so much more than a sack of bones. Remember Paul's First letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15? [often read at Anglican Funerals]

“But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?” How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.” The first Adam was formed from dust by God and lived as a mortal. God, the God who came as the second Adam to deliver to us the fruit of the tree of life of which we were forbidden to eat in the Garden of Eden, is immortal and offers to us the fruit of immortality with God.

So these ashes tonight are to remind us once again of our mortality. They are to call us to look at our spiritual and biological clocks and to see what time it is. It is time for a change! Greet it with hope and an open and warm heart. You have a butterfly to look forward to on the other side of the cocoon. Butterflies are free my friend, and so will you be. Butterflies are creatures of change, from the ugly pupae undergoing transformation they once were to the beautiful butterflies they will become.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

To put it another way, Are ashes what we leave behind us, or will we leave something else? It is now time to think about that. What will you leave behind you? AMEN