
Is Ash Wednesday A Happy Day

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Ash Wednesday**

"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face." -Matthew 6:16,17

In a few minutes, we are going to do something that looks like outright disobedience to that gospel text. When we put ashes on our forehead, it will look like "to the world" that we are disfiguring our faces. To the world, we will look like we are "dismal, like the hypocrites."

The world says that Ash Wednesday does not look like a happy day at all.

To the world, happiness is something else. Happiness would be winning that three hundred and fifty million dollar lottery the other day. Isn't it amazing how much media coverage our lotteries command?

The culture around us would have us believe that happiness is a forty day long vacation. Take a look at the commercials which bombard us each day; some people say we receive over 3,000 advertising images a day. We are meant to covet that new car which will take us out of our misery. We are urged to book flights and rent vacation homes that deliver us from the boredom of an ordinary day, or the ordinary Monday through Friday week. On television, we see images of showers with soaps and perfumes that promise to take us straight to paradise.

Today, the Christian Church says put an ashen smudge over that freshly washed face. It looks to the world that we are truly dismal, like the hypocrites. Outside observers may well exclaim, "How morbid and sad the Christian Church seems!"

Actually, some of us will feel dismal today. We will feel guilty and worthless. But if we leave here feeling dismal and guilty, we have missed the point of today.

Today, Ash Wednesday is meant to be a happy day. Today, we learn a happiness that the culture around us does not understand.

Christianity claims, over time, that what makes human beings happy is being in right relationship with God. It is not winning the lottery, it is not achieving popularity, it is not being accepted at the right job or in the right social circles, and it is not having the right friends. Happiness is being forgiven. It is being right before God.

Being right before God means being truthful and honest about who we are. We take time to confess our shortcomings and our failures. We all have them. Lent gives us a safe opportunity to admit them. Lent reminds us again what the true love of God is. And Lent is also the opportunity to take stock of our gifts and talents and resources. What is our purpose in this world? What does God want me to be doing?

These are all the questions of Lent. In fact, they were the questions of Jesus when he spent forty days in the wilderness before he began his ministry. When we ask ourselves these questions, and then listen for the answers, we are "right before God." We are on a road to holiness. Holiness is the word.

Listen again to the thunderous words from Isaiah: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into your house." (Isaiah 58.6-7)

That is not dismal or gloomy activity. That is holy activity! The mystery of Christianity is that it holy activity that makes us happy.

If you do these things, continues Isaiah, "your light shall break forth like the dawn. ,You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail." (Isaiah 58.8, 11).

Holiness is the word. God calls us this day to holy Lent.

Holy people are the happiest people I know. Holy people, who know themselves accurately and who know God accurately, who search and who listen, who serve others faithfully right where God has them, they are the happiest people I know.

Holy people are fasting today, you are smudging your foreheads with the ash of humility, and you are serving the poor. But you are not unhappy. You are not dismal, like the hypocrites. Holy people do not need to search for happiness - happiness finds you today, in the grace and love of Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

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