

Ash Wednesday 2019
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The smattering of ash used to trace a cross on our foreheads this Ash Wednesday is what's left of the massive amount of ash that penitents used to sift over their heads as they sat in sackcloth on the church steps in "the olden days." Public humiliation was part of the price for being a big-time sinner. As someone has said, "If you can't be a shining example, be a terrible warning!"

This age-old practice of receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday isn't intended to **humiliate**, though. Instead, it's an act of **humility—and of hope**. In **humility** I admit, "I'm a sinner," and in **hope** I remember: "I have a Savior." When we leave this place, the visible cross tells **who** I am: a Christian. But most importantly, it tells **Whose** I am: Christ's. What were we told at our baptismal anointing? "You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit, and marked with the cross of Christ forever." Yes, the cross speaks of suffering. But for us, the cross is **above all the Tree of Life**. Our Lord died that we might live. Yes, ash is a reminder of our **sin** and of our **mortality**: "Remember, you are dust, and to dust you shall return." But ash represents **cleansing and resurrection**, too. In the days before Dawn dishwashing liquid, ash was used like sand to scrub dishes, pots and pans clean. And the phoenix rises from its ashes....

I have another take on ashes this year, too, after an experience Pastor Mark and I had in the cathedral in Chartres, France, this past September. We were blessed to be part of a group that had the cathedral to ourselves one cool fall evening. We waited outside that medieval sanctuary as darkness descended, standing beneath the magnificent sculptures of the façade and near the stone steps where penitents once sat in sackcloth and ashes. When our guide arrived, we learned through a translator that his family has lived in Chartres for the past 500 years, and has always

served the cathedral in one way or another. He unlocked a side door that led to an uneven stone staircase descending to the crypt. We were instructed not to use the flashlight on our phones, but to navigate by holding the hand rail and following the light of the red vigil candles that bordered each side of the steps. We quietly and carefully followed him like obedient ducklings to the crypt of Notre Dame Sous Terre: Our Lady Under the Earth. A beautiful statue of Mother & Child presides over that space, from the wall behind the altar. We filed into wooden pews and were invited to search our hearts for something we needed to **leave behind in order to move ahead** – spiritually. We’d received a small slip of paper to write on. No essays required! Just one or two words, enough to name whatever burden we were carrying that weighed down our soul or served as a barrier between us and our Lord.

Now I invite **you** to look into **your** heart: **what do you need to leave behind in order to move ahead?** What is consuming unholy energy? What casts a pall rather than shedding light? What is draining you, making a giant sucking sound instead of filling you up? A word... 2 words... **What do you need to leave behind in order to move ahead? Spiritually?**

We exited that little chapel and followed the candlelit pathway to another subterranean hallway where the ancient stone baptismal font stands. On the font sat a burning bowl. As we each approached the person standing there, we placed our paper in the bowl, the “secret slip” naming what we needed to release, to offload, to distance from in order to draw closer to the Lord. She touched flame to the paper and we saw the fire catch and the slip blacken, curl, shrivel, disappear.... The burden, the barrier, the unholy wall between God and us literally went up in smoke. Leaving -- ash.

The phoenix rises up from the ashes and becomes a symbol of resurrection. The forest is renewed after a wildfire, seedlings growing from pinecones that will only release their seeds in extreme heat. Ashes will fertilize a garden. Ashes will scour us clean.

After leaving the font we followed the path the newly baptized still walk in Chartres, ascending stairs bordered now by white candles, leading to the upstairs chancel where the altar stands and the Meal is celebrated. The west rose window was a kaleidoscope of color, a beautiful pinwheel that seemed to rotate as we watched, colors changing on the inside as a light show on the outside illuminated the façade. Spectacular!

Our baptism leads to a daily dying and rising, mercies fresh each morning, holy forgiveness always available, new life awaiting us for the asking. This Ash Wednesday and every day of this 40 day journey, let's hear our Lord say to us: "Behold, I make all things new!" Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham