

Ash Wednesday 2023: The Divine Fingerprint on God's Artwork: +
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
February 22, 2023
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"God's fingerprint": +. Same fingerprint on all of us: from youngest to oldest, kindest to grumpiest, gladdest to saddest, Energizer Bunny to couch potato, picture-of-health to sickest, most hope-filled to most forlorn. Like Holy Communion, the distribution of ashes on Ash Wednesday is a great leveler: *"We have **all** sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."* (Rom. 3:23)

God's children come in many shapes and sizes. Some are short; when they kneel at the rail I have to bend down a little to see them eye to eye. Some are babies in their parent's arms, and duck and wiggle so the cross may end up more like a squiggle ☺. Some have bangs that I part to impose the ashes. Some are bald or balding and make me feel like an artist provided with a beautiful canvas on which to trace the cross. Some are wearing foundation so beautifully applied I almost hesitate to mar it with ash. But I go ahead anyway. Some are so young it is jarring for me to say, "You are dust and to dust you shall return." But I do. I know that some of you are ill; it is painful for me to say, and perhaps for you to hear, "You are dust and to dust you shall return." But I speak and you listen anyway. Some of you wear white, forgetting that ash often crumbles off my thumb and lands on your shirt or blouse. But I impose the ashes anyway and you forgive me even if the dry cleaner is your next stop. **Why** do we come in the middle of the week, in the midst of our busy lives? Because *"We have **all** sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."*

Same fingerprint, God's fingerprint, on **all** of us, even if you're a cradle Lutheran of a certain age who has never warmed up to receiving ashes. We were **all** marked with God's fingerprint when we were baptized, called by name, "marked with the cross of Christ forever." On Sunday I mentioned the unfinished da Vinci painting, "St. Jerome in the Desert," that was on loan to the Met last year. Pastor Mark & I made a special trip into the City, met Kristiane at the museum, so we

could all see it. It's not something I'd want to hang in my living room, for sure. Da Vinci never even finished it. But the amazing thing that made it worth seeing was that fingerprint, the master's unique fingerprint. You can't see it with the naked eye, but the conservators had taken a photo and kindly magnified it so viewers wouldn't miss the wonder of it.

Our Maker's fingerprints are all over us, but the evidence of the Divine gets overshadowed or temporarily obliterated by our failures in love, our sin. My lack of love and respect for God and others, my prioritizing my own pleasure and convenience over my neighbor's need, paints an ugly wash over God's masterpiece. My sadness that I screwed up, my confession and God's absolution, the gift of holy forgiveness restores the piece of art to its original beauty. That's why we need Lent: intentional time to look at myself and ask the Holy Spirit to show me where I've become "less than": less than faithful, less than devoted to God, less than devoted to the people closest to me, less than compassionate to people who are strangers yet whose needs are obvious or who have been placed in my path for some holy purpose.

Ash Wednesday is the first step of a pilgrimage, as surely as many who walk the Camino to Santiago de Compostela in Spain start out in France or Portugal. "The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." Ash Wednesday is the first step, like a wedding ceremony is the first step of a marriage, like Holy Baptism is the first step of a Christian life. We've gotta start anew somewhere, and for many, Ash Wednesday and Lent are the perfect opportunity for a spiritual "reset," the careful restoration of the work of art which is God's unique creation: each one of us.

Maybe there's a certain life-sapping behavior that we're **more than aware** is getting between us and God. Lent is an open door to walk through and weigh what attracts us to that behavior, what we gain in the short term and lose in the long run. Maybe it's the kind of behavior

that makes us think we don't even **belong** in church. But remember: this is exactly where sinners **do** belong, because *"We have **all** sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."*

There are reasons in each one of our lives that we need to *"be reconciled to God,"* as St. Paul pleads in his second letter to the Corinthians, today's 2nd lesson. In some traditions being reconciled to God is about avoiding damnation, but in ours it's about entering more and more into **intimacy**, loving relationship with the God who has created and redeemed us out of pure love, the God who is readier to forgive than we are to ask forgiveness, the God who says, *"See, I am making all things new."* (Isaiah 43:19; Revelation 21:5)

With the Holy Spirit's help, decide on a Lenten discipline, a spiritual practice, that will draw you closer to God's heart. Maybe it's doing less of something that **distracts you from** God; maybe it's doing more of something that **attracts you to** God. Make it something that will increase your love of God and help your neighbor, not something that will simply make you miserable. If it's some form of fasting, may it make you hungry for God. If it's some form of prayer, worship or Scripture, may it help you hear God's voice more clearly and follow it more nearly. If it's some form of almsgiving, a generous offering of time, talent or treasure, may it help you value what is eternal, be grateful for God's blessings, and store up treasures in Heaven. To repeat a beautiful perspective on Lent that I shared in Sunday's sermon:

[Jesus'] path of love will lead down into the valley, through the dry cinders of Ash Wednesday and the tears of the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Sorrow... [R]emember that the journey through ashes and sorrow is never for its own sake. It's for the sake of what comes next. In a word, it's for the sake of transfiguration, a radiant new life and a dazzling new world.¹

It's for the restoration of God's work of art: you.

Amen

¹www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/2/18/transfiguration-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-transfiguration-Sunday.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

