

**“Why Do We Want To Be Reminded of our Condition”**

**Joel 2:1–2, 12–17; Psalm 51; 2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10;**

**Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21**

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I have had a number of nicknames, not all of which I can mention from a pulpit, but one that Ian gave me when he was in high school was The Bluebird of Happiness. It was a sarcastic title, not an honorific one. Once too often I shared some piece of bad news about someone in an otherwise pleasant conversation. So, Ian said, with sarcasm dripping and eyes rolling, “Thanks, Dad, you’re The Bluebird of Happiness.”

For better or worse, the name stuck. Mary Hauser even found an old 45 of the song — there is a song by this name — and it sits in my office. The staff has not learned to sing it yet, but we’ll get there. It is great to be known as a downcast Eeyore, a dependable harbinger of doom and gloom, I say with my own sarcasm dripping and eyes rolling.

But I can at least feel at home leading this service. The question is, “What are you doing here?” This is a service where we are reminded of our frailty and sin, a purpose worthy of The BB of H. “From dust you have come, to dust you will return,” we say while imposing ashes made from last year’s Palm Sunday palm fronds on your forehead in the shape of a cross. We are only facing reality, but why do we do this, why do we want to be reminded of our condition?

Well, because we can’t address a problem or need until we acknowledge it. We can’t get to a better place in our personal lives, in the church, or in society, until we realize the true nature of where we are now. Ash Wednesday creates an opportunity to do this, to go back to square one and start over, to have a reset, the way some athletes talk about moving past a poor performance in a game or even a half.

Now, we do worship around the same texts every year, and we may name the same issues or at least similar ones repeatedly without ever completely resolving them. Writing for *The Christian Century* this month, retired pastor Stephen Steagald laments this repetitive aspect of Ash

Wednesday and Lent (p. 28). This year, he says, he's giving up rude and argumentative, along with many behavioral and spiritual cognates: pride, presumption, priggishness, puffery. Last year, he says, he gave up curmudgeonliness and judgmentalism, though admittedly without immediate or protracted success. He confesses that this is how it goes with him and Lent, he has quite a backlog of unfinished repentances, *devotione interruptus*, he calls it.

Well, so it goes for us all, but there is still a benefit to naming our struggles. Some progress is better than no progress, and all the texts call us to self-examination. Joel calls a nation to repentance, with fasting and weeping and the rending of hearts, trusting in the mercy of God. Psalm 51 is more personal, naming personal sin and asking God to create a new heart within us. 2 Corinthians expresses the urgency of being reconciled to God, saying now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation! In the reading from Matthew, Jesus underscores the need for authenticity in faith and repentance; hypocritical acts of piety fool no one. All of this seems quite relevant to us right now, and all of it points to the wisdom of naming our frailty and sin.

When it comes to sin, the good news is God meets us with grace, and in the context of grace, something better is possible. I think of the character in C.S. Lewis' novel *The Great Divorce* who struggles to make it to the mountains of heaven. One thing holds him back, a little red lizard on his shoulder who represents whatever holds any of us back. An angelic figure pleads with the character to allow him to remove it, but the character worries that it may hurt, and he has become accustomed to the lizard. Finally, in a brief moment of decisiveness, he allows the angel to remove the lizard. It hits the ground and is transformed into a great horse which he rides into the mountains of heaven. Confronting our sin, whatever holds us back, frees us to experience something better.

When it comes to frailty, there is also an element of grace. Acknowledging the limited nature of our lives enables us to recognize the preciousness of life and it points to our need for Easter hope. Near the end of Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* Emily has died in childbirth, and her funeral has been held, when she decides that she wants to go back to see the people she loved. She is advised not to because she won't be able to interact with them, but she insists.

So, she goes back for one day, her twelfth birthday, but after a brief time, she wants to leave, not because of the inability to interact with the living but because no one seems to realize just how precious life is, every detail, every moment. She asks the Stage Manager, the central character in the play, “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? — every, every minute?” The Stage Manager replies, “No,” and then pauses before saying, “The saints and poets, maybe — they do some.”

Different things can alert us to the preciousness of life, but there is nothing quite as effective as recognizing the brevity of it. When we know our time is short, each moment, every conversation, each person, becomes significant. But the truth is life is short for all of us, limited, frail, and while naming this can seem like the biggest downer imaginable, it can also be a wake-up call to appreciate life as the gift it is. Understood this way, the words, “From dust you have come, to dust you will return,” are words of hope and possibility.

They remind us that we should not take anything for granted — we don’t know that we will be here with these people experiencing this ever again — and they push us to take more seriously the question of whether there is more than this life.

We make certain claims about eternal life, but most of us don’t think about these claims very much or consider them a central concern until we lose someone close to us. There is no more important concern. We obsess over financial things, professional challenges and accomplishments, various recreational pursuits, and they are all part of life, but is this all there is to life, and is this life all there is? The possibility of something more doesn’t diminish this life, it only enhances it, and it alleviates the most central, existential anxiety all human beings experience — the fear of death.

So, the imposition of ashes is a gift, not a curse. It reminds us of our frailty and sin, but it also points us toward grace, the preciousness of life, and our hope in eternity. That we impose ashes in the shape of a cross seems ominous, because it is, but we know the cross is not the end, we know what lies beyond it for Jesus and us. This is a message worthy of a genuine Bluebird of Happiness.