

Reflections on Ash Wednesday

Stuart Malloy

[Ash Wednesday](#) is the first day of [Lent](#). It is a somber day of reflection on what needs to change in our lives if we are to be fully Christians. It was not always the way we know it today. Ashes marked on the forehead of worshippers were not given to everyone, but only to the public penitents who were brought before the church. Much like Hester Prynne bearing her scarlet letter, these open and notorious sinners were marked publicly with the sign of their disgrace.

[The common folk mostly were illiterate, so the church instituted the rituals to impress upon them the belief system. Those that wanted to join the church were marked with the ashes, (associated with grief) then had instruction and repentance for 40 days (remembering Christ's temptation by Satan in the desert, accompanied with fasting) and were baptized on Resurrection Sunday.(acceptance into the Body of Christ- the Church)]

As time went on, others began to show their humility and their affection for the penitents by asking that they, too, be marked as sinners. Finally, the number of penitents grew so large that the imposition of ashes was extended to the whole congregation in services similar to those that are observed in many Christian churches on Ash Wednesday.

We who will bear the ashes upon our foreheads stand with those whose sins may be more public, but not, according to the Scriptures, more grievous to the heart of God. And so we make our confessions. . . . If you only knew the secrets of my heart, if you only knew the sins that I am capable of contemplating, if you only knew some of the schemes I have considered – and of course God does know – then you would know that I, too, am a sinner.

Ashes are signs that we are all in this sin business together, and that the difference between the good in us and the bad in us is sometimes frightfully thin. We so often fall short of the Faith we claim. We have treated people as things and we have treated things as if they were valuable people. And so we look into our hearts and make the ancient prayer of one notorious sinner our own: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10; see [Psalm 51 and the Language of Transformation](#)).

Lent is a season that reminds us to repent and get our lives centered, our priorities straight, and our hearts clean. This holy season offers us a new chance to say, "yes" to the Lover of our Souls who created us, who made us in his own image. Lent is the time for a restoration project that will reveal the beauty of God's design for us, showing once again the scale, proportion, and priorities intended by our Maker.

Further, Lent is a season of hope and with ashes on our foreheads and hope in our hearts, we go forth to love and serve. For by God's grace in Christ, we do not have to stay the way we are.

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