

**Homily – Happy Ash Wednesday**  
**The Rev. Susan Arnold**  
**February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023 – St. Barnabas Episcopal Church**

Jesus said: "*Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them...*" In a few minutes Fr. Rob will read to us this invitation from the Book of Common Prayer:

*I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now kneel before the Lord, our maker and redeemer.*

In other words, happy Ash Wednesday! Happy Ash Wednesday? Ash Wednesday is not a feast day, it is a fast day. Feast means eat; fast means don't eat. Right?

We usually associate feasting with a celebration. Celebrations are happy times. And fasting is often associated with punishment. While fasting is not the total denial of sustenance. It **is** the denial of anything other than the most basic of human needs.

The purpose is to "show" that we are remorseful (penitent) for our hubris and exaggeration of our importance and self-reliance; our lack of remembering that without God we are nothing.

In this penitent state our demeanor is somber, serious, and sometimes even sad.

How, then, can we celebrate if we are being penitent?

Self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting, self-denial, meditating?

These are not words we usually think of when we are celebrating. But I think that is exactly what we are doing. How so?

Consider this: Christians are to focus on the love God has for us; the love our Lord Jesus Christ showed us in his life and ministry. That love can leave us with nothing but joy--as the Psalmist wrote: "*He forgives all your sins and heals all your infirmities; He redeems your life from the grave and crowns you with mercy and loving-kindness; He satisfies you with good things,...*"

Knowing that, how can we be somber and sad? The very act of repentance brings joy because we are enveloped in God's forgiveness and love.

Today we begin a celebration of God's love by engaging in a focused look inward of ourselves individually and as a community for the next 5 weeks.

How are we living into God's way of love, justice, and peace? What do we need to do to live into that way more fully? How do we participate actively in this way of life with each other and the world around us?

Jesus said, "*Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them...*" But, he did **not** say, "do not practice your **faith** before others." In fact, he said, "*let your light*

*shine as a city on the hill.*"

Today our celebration of this *time* is a public outward and visible sign of our response to

God's love through the sacrifice of Jesus. We are about to receive the "sign of the cross" written in ashes on our foreheads. We will wear that cross when we leave this place as that visible sign to ourselves and others of our promise to God to "...resist evil and whenever we fall into sin to repent and return to the Lord, to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons; loving our neighbor as ourselves, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

This is not to say that we forget that we as humans are prone to mistakes--sometimes unfortunately purposeful.

In fact, **this** is the impetus for our celebration. It is **because** of this that we "fast"--taking time from the very things that take away our focus on the most basic of our need human need--God.

And in so doing we can better acknowledge that we, made from the dust of the earth, are so gifted with the love of God that passes all understanding.  
Happy Ash Wednesday!