



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## “The Ash Wednesday Door”

*Sermon preached at the six o'clock pm service, February 10, 2016*

*Ash Wednesday—Based on Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21*

Usually, the entrances to homes, like the entrances to churches, are meant to be inviting and beautiful. There is a clear, unobstructed path to the door. Perhaps a shiny knocker or glowing doorbell. Perhaps there's a welcome mat that actually says, “Welcome.” If you are coming, say, for a party, there might be someone to take your coat and offer you a drink. The greatest entrances not only dazzle, but they have the knack, even in a strange, new place, of making you feel at peace, like you belong, like you are at home.

If the holy season of Lent were a house, I wouldn't expect many people to want to go inside, let alone stay awhile, 40 days or so. Because Ash Wednesday would be the door. If you think about it, it's a most inhospitable door. First, it's not your size. At least you have to contort yourself into an unfamiliar position to get through it; perhaps you have to stoop lower than you usually do. Maybe you have to get on your knees for a moment, which you're not used to doing. Also, you are more than likely to bump your head at the top of the door frame, which is covered in soot or something gross you'd rather not touch. And then, to make things worse, there are all kinds of things written on the door and on the frame. “You are dirt and to dirt you shall return.” “Remember that you are going to die.” And then, I don't know how they did this, the owners of this house have hired a private eye or stalked you online, and they've nailed a list of all the things you have done wrong in your life, from the deepest betrayal to the briefest uncharitable thought: it's all there for you to read and mull over. Take your time. And if you make it inside, don't expect a sumptuous feast. Expect some bread and water, and not much of it. But before you enter, don't forget to wipe your feet on the mat. But, of course, it doesn't say, “Welcome.” Like the opening to our Gospel reading today, it reads in black and purple letters: “Beware!”

You'd think no one would want to go through a door like that. But, I have to tell you, billions of people are going through a door like that, in places like this and houses of God around the globe. On Ash Wednesday, we pass through this disturbing door every year to enter the holy season of Lent. And where does it take us? This door promises to take us into the less-visited chambers of our soul where, even there, we might be astonished to find God with us.

This first day of Lent includes troubling things like kneeling and verbally considering the things we have done wrong, and taking great care to detail them. We are also encouraged to consider ways that we might fast this season. This is when we give something up that we don't need. And we are prompted to expand our prayer life, our study of the scriptures and holy things, our life of service to others. And we are vividly reminded of our mortality, with burned up palms, victory turned to ash, smeared on our forehead, with the pronouncement that we are like those ashes and to something like those ashes we will return. It slaps us in the face with the stark truth that we were created at one point of time from the elements. And there will be a point when we return to those elements and when this life, at least, will come to an end. We are beckoned to gaze upon the frame of our life, these bookends that we dare not look upon most of the time, and we are called upon to reflect in prayer upon the limited scope that we have been given, and what that might mean.

All of these special practices we have on Ash Wednesday, like that spooky door I described to you, all of these practices have a function. They are meant to disturb us, to trouble our waters. But being disturbed and being troubled is not the point. A door is not made so that you stay in the door. A door is made so that you move from one place to another. All that we do on Ash Wednesday, and all that we do in Lent, is crafted to get us closer to where we are going, to get us home, to get us to God.

Expanding your prayers and your time with the Scriptures gets you closer to God by strengthening that line of communication, nourishing that relationship with God, in both the past and the present, and, at the same time, giving you more tools to know yourself, care for yourself, and then care for others.

Fasting—another word for giving something up—in Lent is a special prayer tool that exercises your will, helps you to focus on God, and in some cases helps you to discover that you don't need as much as you think you did. And in that is a kind of refreshment, in knowing that you don't have to have so much. Actually, what you need is so much less than you assume. This can be a kind of comfort, if you sit with it long enough.

On Ash Wednesday, and in Lent, it is a special time to be penitent, to say you are sorry to God and your neighbor for what you have done wrong or something right you have left undone. We don't do this to wallow and get the release that can sometimes come with grieving. It's more than that. It is meant to be a doorway to repentance. We don't stop there; it gives us access to changing our life and getting it back on track. To have a chance to heal what has been hurt and broken, before it is too late. And it gives us access to really feeling the full breadth and depth of God's mercy and love, which is there for all of us, no matter what. When we make a point of naming our sins and saying we are sorry to God and the person next to us, a new life is opened up, with so much more room for health and thriving than we had thought possible.

And then there is the unique emblem of the day, smearing ashes on each other's foreheads, and reminding each other of our mortality. Ashes have long been a sign of grief, desolation, and death. When we have them placed on our forehead, it is meant to be a kind of shock. Earlier today, I felt the shock when ashes were placed on the head of a tiny baby. Such a grim image on such a precious, beautiful creature. But these ashes are indeed ugly. As death is ugly. We face up to that ugliness. In fact, we become that ugliness by putting the ugliness on our face. But this is not just to wallow in ashes and stay there. It is meant to spur us to wake up. To know that life is short, and we have relatively little time to live, in the grand scheme of things. Sometimes we can float through life in a fog, thinking that we have all the time in the world. But, alas, we don't. And placing ashes on ourselves equips us to see and feel and know, and more than that, become a kind of living symbol, a billboard, of the reality of grief and death. And with that tiny smudge and the short span we display the ashes, we are made ever more aware of the preciousness and beauty of the life we have *as we live it*. We grieve our lives before they are gone, so that we might love our lives while we live them. And this is all done with the sign of the cross, the method of Jesus' lynching, a powerful sign that proclaims that Jesus Christ shared our mortality. And it is not in grief and death that we are abandoned by God. It is in times and places like that that Jesus is especially present with us. If we can remember that, in those dark times, our spirits will be so much better for it.

Ash Wednesday gives us so many tools, at first off-putting, but ultimately supportive and strengthening. And we would do well to have them part of our spiritual life. But I want to finish by reminding you of that mat that I talked about, the mat at the door to Lent that says, "Beware!" It says, "Beware" because Jesus said, "Beware." And this should be troubling. Jesus is the one who tells us so often to "be not afraid" and to "fear not." When Jesus says, "Be wary," we should be on alert. He tells us to beware of all the practices that I just spoke about. Fasting. Praying. Penitent actions. And on top of that, giving money to charity. He didn't sell these behaviors. He said we should beware them. Why? There's nothing wrong with the practices; in fact they are excellent. But we must beware of doing these practices in order to be seen by others. Because this is exactly the way to miss the point! You could fast one Lent because you want to look good in a bathing suit. You could go to church in order to impress someone in your career. You could give to charity to be photographed at a gala. You could be in a relationship for money, instead of for love. You could live your life so that you have a great obituary or epitaph. You could live your entire life to get the esteem of others. But this is the big thing for Jesus. The great warning. The great Beware. You could do everything right in life, but if you do it to be more popular or to be better esteemed, all that work will be for nought, maybe even worse than that! As Jesus said, the people who do this, they have their reward. The reward on the earthly plane, one that moths can eat, rust can consume and thieves can pilfer. But Jesus yearns to give you blessings and good things that no one can take away from you. You can have your stuff and your money taken away; your reputation, even your life can be taken away from you, as it was from Jesus.

But if we aren't careful, we can steal the imperishable things from ourselves, in how we pursue them. If we do good things for our own glory, the greatest virtuous acts on the surface will prove hollow in the clear light of heaven. And so Jesus wants us to be sure that we get this entrance right. He wants us to take care to scour our hearts and souls, to get off on the right foot, in the correct direction. As you know from orienteering, if your compass is broken, you can find yourself deeply lost. And the best way that Jesus insists to keep that compass in good repair is to do our good works quietly and without fanfare. This is one of the best ways not to fall into the trap of vainglory. To avoid making a show, and to quietly set our desire to be a child of God, not to chase after earthly rewards which will lead us into chasing after other people's desires for us down a hall of shifting mirrors in anxiety and elusive peace.

I remind you of Jesus' seemingly improper encounter with the woman at the well in Samaria. He said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

This is what you will find through the imposing door that is opened to you on Ash Wednesday: an ancient well of deep peace and a well that never runs out. And once found, it can never be taken away from you because it is rooted in the bedrock of who you are and who God is, not in the shifting sands of who people say or think you are. This well springs forth heavenly rewards that are truly yours, because they are truly of God, no matter what anyone may say or think. No matter the optics, no matter the opinions, God who sees in secret knows what's what. What you are going through, and what you have truly accomplished. God is with you in love and mercy, and wants to help, so that you may perceive in your lifetime ever more love and ever more mercy. So may you open yourself to these powerful Lenten disciplines, and may you do them for God and no one else, so that

your Ash Wednesday and your Lent may be a doorway to eternal and imperishable blessings that no moth can ruin, no rust can tarnish, nor any thief pilfer. A well of living water in your heart, which plumbs the depths of God's love for you and all Creation.

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