

The Ashes of Lent

Ash Wednesday, March 6th, marks the beginning of the Lenten season, a forty-day observance that leads to Holy Week, climaxing with the triumphant celebration of our Lord's Resurrection on Easter Sunday. However, the beginning of the penitential season of Lent is quite somber. On Ash Wednesday, prior to the Services, we will have the opportunity to receive the imposition of ashes on our foreheads, reminding us that "dust you are and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3: 19). Marked with the sign of the cross, we begin our Lenten observance.

Let us recall a time during Jesus' earthly ministry when He and His disciples were traveling to Galilee and passed through Samaria. There was a major disconnect between the Samaritans and the Jews. The Samaritans' Jewish heritage had been adulterated through intermarriage and whose observance of Judaism was regarded as corrupt (notes in The Lutheran Study Bible, page 1557). Most Jews regarded the Samaritans as outside the bounds of the covenant people and avoided them (Luke 9: 52-53).

When Jesus was at Jacob's well, He sat beside it, because it was the sixth hour (noon) and He was wearied from His journey. A Samaritan woman came to the well, and Jesus asked her for a drink, since He had no means of drawing a cup of water. In their ensuing conversation Jesus speaks of the Living Water and says that those who drink of this water will never thirst again. The unnamed Samaritan woman said, "Sir, give me this water" (John 4: 15). She may not yet have fully understood what Jesus had told her, but she was beginning to recognize that she was in deep need. This need was made clear when Jesus told her that He knew she had five previous husbands and "the one you

now have is not your husband" (John 4: 18).

Jesus told this woman that she needed the Living Water more than anything else, and Jesus Himself is the Living Water. By faith in Him, she will have eternal life, already in her present life and for eternity. Because of our sin, we have the very same need. The Samaritan woman's troubles were related to the fact that her life was spiritually empty, completely dried up, and so she was attempting to fill her life with a series of meaningless relationships. She needed what Jesus only can give – Living Water.

We have the very same need; by nature, our lives are dried up and badly in need of the grace and mercy of God. The Lenten season helps us to realize how desperate our spiritual situation is, and how our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to give Himself into death on the cross so that we would be rescued from the powers of sin and death. Jesus comes as the Living Water to quench our spiritual thirst and give hope, help and peace to us by His death and resurrection.

The ashes of Ash Wednesday are dry and lifeless. The sign of the cross made with these ashes brings the good news that our Savior has such great love that He is willing to die for us. Lent is a time when we look at our lives according to God's Word and confess to Him the many ways in which we have sinned against Him in thought, word and deed. During our Lenten midweek Services as well as our Sunday Services, we ask for God's forgiveness and we are assured that He does forgive our sins. The Lenten hymn "Christ, the Life of All the Living," includes these words at the end of each stanza, "Thousand, thousand thanks shall be, Dearest Jesus unto Thee." Stanza seven's final words are "[I] shall praise Thee, Lord, on high" (LSB, 420).

Rev. Richard S. Radtke, Pastor Emeritus