

We All Fall Down

Romans 3:9-12; 22-24

There is a game children play that goes like this:

Ring around a rosey,
A pocket full of posies;
Ashes, ashes . . .
All fall down.

No one knows for sure what the chant means. Who would dare suggest that adults could ever fully understand what children are thinking about when they play? But children end each round falling down in a heap of laughter. And that's the image in my mind on Ash Wednesday – human beings in this endless game of life, generation after generation, tumbling as we sing, "Ashes, ashes, we all fall down."

Ash Wednesday is the day that opens the Lenten season. Lent itself is meant to be a time of self-examination and penitence. The ash on the forehead is a badge of confession and of repentance. It is a badge that announces, "Ashes, ashes, we all fall down."

Ashes are an ancient biblical symbol of sin, shame, and remorse. You find the reference perhaps a dozen times in the Old Testament. When persons felt life had caved in on them, or that they had lost all their friends, or that they were separated from God, they would clothe themselves in rough sackcloth, then throw ashes over their bodies and into their hair.

The symbolism is vivid. So vivid, it hardly needs explaining. Ashes speak to us of destruction and loss. If a family suffers a fire, they'll almost surely say, "Everything's gone. All we have to show are the ashes." The idea is so powerful that we use the phrase for all kinds of loss – "my dreams have turned into dust and ashes." We speak the ashes theme at the graveside, as the last earthly remains are lowered into their resting place: "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

When life crashed in on that good man Job, he at last sat down on an ash heap to scrape his boils. There must have been better places to sit, and surely more comfortable ones, but an ash heap seemed to Job the most appropriate setting. He said,

"[God] has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes." (Job 30:19)

Ashes are a universal symbol of loss, of despair, of heartbreak, and of repentance. No wonder, then, that our spiritual ancestors in the Church used ashes as a symbol for the beginning of the season of repentance. If you feel sorry for your sins, and if it seems to you that you have burned up some of the best of life so that now all you have to show for yourself are some ashes – ah, then, ashes belong on the forehead.

And, please tell me, who can feel otherwise? Is there any one of us who can say that we've never sullied life? The Apostle Paul, put it sharply and inclusively:

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

(Romans 3:23)

"There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God." (Romans 3:10-11)

We all fall down. In this game of life, this ring around the rosey, we all fall down. Some may feel that we talk too much about sin on a day like Ash Wednesday, but some traits of our character – some expression of sin – are so imbedded in human personality that we scarcely think about them at all.

- How easily we speak the words that cut a friend or a spouse. We hurry past hoping they didn't notice, but the words have been spoken and the harm done. Later, if we think about them at all, we say, "Oh well, they had it coming."
- We engage in an innocent thing – or nearly innocent thing – until it becomes a habit, then a binding vice, so that we not only fall down, we can no longer imagine a way to get back up.
- Sometimes on the outside we walk a straight line, but within the mind races thoughts of lust, or anger, or crude ambition, or desire for revenge. No one knows the game our minds are playing, while our faces and conduct are quite proper. But, believe me, we can't fool this game of life. There is a God with whom we must at last deal.

That's why we need Ash Wednesday – because we all fall down. We sin and come short of the glory of God. And in our ashes we begin the act of repentance before God. Of course, Ash Wednesday is not the only time we should confess our mortality and repent. This ought to be a daily act, so that we keep confessed-up before God. But Ash Wednesday dramatizes the need and provides a particularly apt setting for our repentance – and with it, new hope.

Several years ago, a church in a large metropolitan area began the Lenten season with this large advertisement – “From Ashes to Easter.” That’s a lovely statement of our journey. We begin with the ashes of our failures, our mistakes, our sins, and our need, but we move on to the grand deliverance of Easter. We have our ashes, our falling down, but thanks be to God, we have Easter. Our Lord has triumphed over this game.

I think I wouldn’t want to preach on Ash Wednesday if there were not the prospect of Easter. I couldn’t bear to announce that we “all fall down” if the story ended there. Ours is a better ring around the rose. Ashes and all, we rise up to start anew. For we are a resurrection people, blessed with new life in Christ, and we must remember this, even as we repent on Ash Wednesday. We all fall down, but by God’s grace we can rise to start anew.