

## **Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21**

**ASH WEDNESDAY IS THE FIRST DAY OF THE SEASON OF LENT AND BEGINS WITH A VIVID REMINDER OF DEATH. AS CHRISTIANS, TONIGHT OUR FOREHEADS WILL BE MARKED WITH ASHES IN THE SHAPE OF THE CROSS AS THE WORDS ECHOED FROM FUNERAL LITURGY IS WHISPERED: REMEMBER YOU ARE DUST AND TO DUST YOU SHALL RETURN...**

**DEATH IS ONE OF THE PRIMARY THEMES OF LENT. EACH OF US WILL DIE. NONE OF US GETS OUT OF HERE ALIVE. PERHAPS ASH WEDNESDAY IS THE MOST HONEST SERVICE OF THE CHURCH YEAR AS WE ARE CONFRONTED WITH THE FACT WE ARE DUST.**

**YET THERE ARE MANY CONGREGATIONS WHO NO LONGER OBSERVE ASH WEDNESDAY. ONE AUTHOR WRITES THAT LENT IS IN TROUBLE AND EXPLAINS THAT MOST OF US HAVE FAVORITE HOLIDAY SEASONS...FOR SOME IT'S CHRISTMAS, WITH THE FAMILY GETTING TOGETHER AND GIFTS. FOR OTHERS IT'S THE 4<sup>TH</sup> OF JULY AND SUMMER, FILLED WITH A SENSE OF NATIONAL PRIDE AND BEACH VACATIONS. BUT EACH YEAR AT JUST ABOUT THIS TIME, VERY FEW OF US WOULD PICK LENT, A SEASON THAT SEEMS TO MOST OF US AS GRIM AS THE WEATHER THAT USUALLY ACCOMPANIES IT.**

**THINK ABOUT IT: CROSSING OFF THE DAYS ON THE CALENDAR UNTIL ASH WEDNESDAY; LEAVING WORK JUST A LITTLE EARLY, SAYING "I'VE GOT TO GET MY LENTEN SHOPPING DONE.", ADVERTISEMENTS ON BILLBOARDS AND TELEVISION READING "ONLY 12 MORE DAYS TIL THE DAY OF ASHES," OR CHILDREN GOING TO BED, ASKING THEIR PARENTS, "HOW MUCH LONGER TILL LENT IS HERE?" IT JUST DOESN'T HAPPEN.**

**THE TROUBLE WITH LENT IS THAT IT FEELS LIKE THIS STRANGE ARCAIC HOLIDAY THAT CELEBRATES THINGS WE DON'T SHARE. NO WONDER THAT EACH YEAR FEWER AND FEWER CHURCHES OBSERVE THIS AGE-OLD FOURTH CENTURY TRADITION. IT'S TOO MEDIEVAL FOR MANY CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS TO HANDLE.**

**PERHAPS LENT IS IN TROUBLE. NO EXCITEMENT..OR EXPECTANCY. WE DON'T LONG TO SING LENTEN HYMNS AHEAD OF TIME. LENT IS IN TROUBLE.**

**MAYBE ITS UNPOPULARITY HAS TO DO WITH THE FACT THAT IT ASKS US TO GIVE UP THINGS.**

**OR MAYBE IT'S THE THEMES OF LENT THAT TROUBLE US. CONFESSION. SACRIFICE. COMTEMPLATION. TOUGH STUFF. WHO NEEDS LENT?**

**JUST MAYBE I NEED A TIME...(40 DAYS) TO HELP CLEAR MY HEAD OF THE DISTRACTIONS WHICH ANY INVOLVED LIFE IN THIS WORLD WILL NECESSARILY BRING AND RE-ORIENT MYSELF TOWARDS THE CREATOR OF ALL THAT WAS GIVEN FOR MY PLEASURE AND WHICH I HAVE LET BECOME MERELY DISTRACTING. 40 DAYS TO RE-ORIENT OURSELVES TOWARD OUR CREATOR...TOWARD JESUS.**

**MAYBE I NEED THE OPPORTUNITY AND PERHAPS DEEP DOWN I CRAVE THE CHANCE TO CLEAR MY EYES OF THE GLAZE OF INDIFFERENCE AND APATHY WHICH COMES FROM SITUATION AFTER SITUATION WHERE I FEEL NEARLY HELPLESS SO THAT I CAN FASTEN MY EYES ONCE MORE ON THE GOD WHO LOVES HIS CHILDREN ENOUGH TO TAKE THE FORM OF A MAN HANGING ON A CROSS.**

**AND MAYBE, JUST MAYBE, LENT IS GOD'S GIFT TO A PEOPLE STARVED FOR MEANING, FOR FORGIVENESS, FOR COMFORT, FOR LIFE.**

**I NEED LENT TO REMIND ME OF WHO I AM...OF WHOSE I AM. I NEED TO BE REMINDED THAT I BELONG TO GOD AND AS I WALK THESE 40 DAYS OF SELF-EXAMINATION AND CHANGE, I TOO WILL RISE ON EASTER MORNING AS A NEW PERSON.**

**YES, I NEED LENT AND I SUSPECT YOU DO TOO. SO IF LENT'S IN TROUBLE, IT'S ONLY BECAUSE WE'RE IN TROUBLE, SO BUSY TRYING TO MAKE OR KEEP OR SAVE OUR LIVES THAT WE FAIL TO NOTICE THAT GOD HAS ALREADY SAVED US AND HAS ALREADY FREED US TO LIVE WITH EACH OTHER AND FOR EACH OTHER ALL THE REST OF OUR DAYS.**

**ASH WEDNESDAY, LENT, HOLY WEEK AND CHRISTIANITY ITSELF ARE ABOUT FOLLOWING JESUS ON THE PATH THAT LEADS THROUGH DEATH TO RESURRECTION. THEY ARE ABOUT DYING AND RISING WITH CHRIST. WE ARE TO FOLLOW JESUS TO JERUSALEM, THE PLACE OF DEATH AND RESURRECTION. THAT IS WHAT THE JOURNEY OF LENT IS ABOUT. LENT IS ABOUT IMPROVING OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS, WITH OURSELVES AND MOST IMPORTANTLY WITH CHRIST. THERE IS NOTHING TO FEAR ABOUT THESE DAYS OF LENT.**

**WHEN YOU HEAR THE WORDS TONIGHT THAT YOU ARE DUST AND TO DUST YOU SHALL RETURN...DO NOT BE AFRAID BUT TRUST IN THE LOVE OF GOD THAT HOLDS YOU.**