

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

February 22, 2023 – ASH WEDNESDAY, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Homily: “*Sacrifices of the Heart*”\*

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17	(Return to God with repentance and fasting)
Psalms 103:8-14	(Bless the Lord for His mercy)
2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10	(Now is the Day of Salvation!)
St. Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21	(Pray, fast, and give—in secret, with humility)

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“What’s that dirt on your head?” my fussy co-worker asked, as I returned to the office at the end of my lunch hour. I patted the top of my hair nervously. Had a stray piece of New York City’s famous windblown trash affixed itself to my scalp, that breezy day in early March? “Where?” I asked, still not getting it. “There!” he pointed to my forehead as he quickly dabbed a paper towel under the office water cooler, intending to remove the offensive soot.

“Oh . . . that.” My officemate had been referring to the misshapen black powder on my brow. A priest’s thumb had pressed it there during a noontime Ash Wednesday service. As I explained, my unchurched co-worker’s eyes glazed over. I could just imagine the little neon sign forming over his head with an arrow blinking in my direction: “Warning: Religious Nut on the Premises! ”

Feeling sheepish, I went to the Ladies’ Room and scrubbed my forehead with soap and water. After all, hadn’t the pastor read a Bible passage about not parading our piety in public?

Wasn’t this very-visible declaration of mourning one’s sins the kind of hypocrisy Jesus denounced? Why had I walked through some of the busiest, most crowded streets in the world, with an advertisement on my face: “*Hey, everybody! It’s Ash Wednesday and I just came from church!*” Indeed, why would the Almighty want anyone to dirty their *faces*, if, as I’d heard in church, “God looks upon the *heart*”? Suddenly, the whole thing was too confusing for my as-yet-fully-born faith.

And so, tonight, some of you may be questioning just as I did those many years ago. You may be pondering the meaning of Ash Wednesday and the sacrifices one is supposed to make during Lent. You may be asking along with me, “Just what is acceptable to God?”

First, let’s take ashes. What comes to mind? Sweeping out our fireplaces after a toasty blaze has grown cold. Sprinkling the remains of a cremated loved-one into a river by which she loved to walk. Or all that remains after a devastating forest fire. Ashes follow deaths of many kinds—including the death of our self-will, and of the world’s priorities. In ancient Israel, placing ashes on one’s head and refraining from food expressed mourning and self-denial in times of community misfortune caused by sin. Perhaps that’s why, in Biblical times, almsgiving was connected with prayer and fasting: If the community was in trouble, self-sacrifice and charitable gifts would be needed for its restoration and recovery.

Jesus of Nazareth, a devout Jewish rabbi, was concerned to keep the devotional practices of His heritage. And so, in our Gospel for Ash Wednesday, Jesus instructs His disciples in the Old Testament disciplines of prayer, fasting, and charitable giving. These are also the Christian disciplines of Lent. But why these three, specifically? The Bible teaches us that we are to love God, love ourselves, and love our neighbor. And if we more closely examine the three Lenten disciplines, each has to do with *whom* we are to *love*.

Prayer is essential to our relationship with *God*. It is through prayer that we draw closer to the Lord and are able to understand God’s will for our lives. Fasting is about *ourselves*.

As we enter into this discipline of self-denial, turning our focus from the things of this world, we also draw closer to God and deepen our faith. Charitable giving, or doing good deeds, is about *our neighbors*. When, as another part of our self-denial, we purposefully increase our charity and outreach to those in need, this, too, brings us into a more intimate relationship with Jesus—He who became poor for our sakes, by coming among us as a servant.

The ashes that mark our foreheads as a sign of our penitence and self-sacrifice come from burning the previous Palm Sunday’s leftover fronds. Interesting . . . Palm Sunday . . . when many hailed Jesus as king, then quickly turned their backs on Him. Palm Sunday is for us the ultimate sign of hypocrisy and faithlessness. Now, we incinerate its emblems as symbols of our repentance and a sincere turning back to God. This is a good thing. But can we abide by the challenge of this day? Perhaps, with God’s help.

I suggest as our theme for Lent 2023, we carry with us the 16<sup>th</sup>-century prayer we will sing during Communion: “*Lord, who throughout these forty days for us did fast and pray, teach us with Thee to mourn our sins and close by Thee to stay . . . And through these days of penitence, and through Thy Passion-tide, yea, evermore in life, and death, Jesus! with us abide.*”

At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus spent 40 days in the desert, praying, fasting, meditating on the Scripture He knew and loved—while growing stronger in His faith, His connection to the Holy Spirit, and His ability to withstand the devil. In this, Jesus shows us that a sustained time of focused repentance, devotion to God, and the practice of spiritual discipline are good for the soul, and necessary for our growth in faith.

Tonight, I’d like to address specifically the discipline of fasting. Some Christians pledge to give up sweets, meat, or alcohol during Lent. Indeed, these may be beneficial to our health. But are such “sacrifices” acceptable to God? Repeatedly, throughout Scripture, we see that God is not interested in “religious” gestures like fasting from food, clothing oneself in symbolic garments of mourning, or wearing ashes on one’s head in public penance—unless these actions are accompanied by the conversion of our hearts and evident changes in our lives.

Psalms 51 tells us, “the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit”—that is, a heart willing to submit to the Lord in all things and do God’s will, not ours or the world’s. If we commit to making a “sacrifice of the heart,” rather than depriving our bodies of donuts for 40 days, wouldn’t it make more of an authentic difference to give up our stubborn pride, our worthless busyness, our selfish laziness, or our narrow-minded lack of love?

This Lent, I encourage each of us to decide how we might “mourn our sins” and “stay close by Jesus” through giving up a thing or an activity that keeps us from being closer to Christ. After all, Jesus gave up everything—His ministry, His family and friends, His future, His very life—for us. What are we willing to give up, for Him? Instead of sacrificing chocolate or French fries I suggest we consider not only giving up that which separates us from Christ, but also giving that which will re-connect us to Him. Think about it—what if you gave up:

- *Complaining*, and instead, gave thanks in all things? (Ephesians 5:20);
- *Putting others down*, and instead, encouraged everyone? (John 15:12);
- *Goofing off*, and instead, devoted yourself to prayer (Colossians 4:2);
- *Fear and worry*, and instead, gave all your anxiety over to God? (1 Peter 5:7);
- *Watching TV or surfing the Internet*, and instead, visited or called a sick person? (Matthew 25:31-46);
- *Buying food only for yourself*, and instead, donated more to our Outreach blue barrel? (Isaiah 58:3-10).

It’s a scientific fact that nature abhors a vacuum. Something will always fill it. So, during Lent, if we are committed to sacrificing ourselves, our hearts, our time, our energy, and our money, turning them from their usual focus and direction, God can and will fill that space—provided we are willing and open to receiving His Divine presence and power, and to obey His leading.

Fasting makes us vulnerable and reminds us of our frailty. We remember that if we are not fed, we will die. And in this awareness, we get in touch with a deeper hunger, yearning to be filled with God’s Holy Spirit. When we commit to fasting from the things of this world, we find ourselves feasting on the bread of heaven, God’s loving presence in Jesus Christ. *Amen.*