

My favorite Disney movie of all time is the Lion King. I'm reminded of it on Ash Wednesday for several reasons. You may know the story. Mufasa, the Lion King, and his wife, Sarabi, have a child, Simba. There is a scene in the movie where Simba is anointed with a liquid on his forehead and then sand is spread on. It reminds me of the cross of ashes we receive on this day. The other reason I am reminded of the Lion King is because of the song "The Circle of Life." The chorus to that song goes like this: It's the circle of life, and it moves us all, through despair and hope, through faith and love, till we find our place, on the path unwinding, in the circle of life. In some ways, Ash Wednesday is about the circle of life, our place in it, and our dependence on God.

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent, the season of renewal and repentance of our faith. On Ash Wednesday, we remember with prayer and with the tangible symbol of ashes, the fact that we are mortal – that we don't live forever –, we remember our place in the cycle of life, and we remember our dependence on God.

Rev. Jennifer McNally reminds us that the imposition of ashes is an important part of many Ash Wednesday services. Ashes have both ritualistic and symbolic meanings. In the Old Testament, ashes are often part of stories of pleas to God for mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. The prophet Daniel dressed in sackcloth and ashes as a sign of his people's regret for the ways they turned away from God. The Ninevites did the same when they turned away from corruption and back toward God. A big part of Ash Wednesday is the invitation to reflect on our own mortality, with a focus on the words God speaks to Adam in Genesis 3:19: "For dust you are and to dust you shall return." The sign of the cross on our forehead with ashes reminds us of our baptism and reminds us that in both life and in death we belong to God....we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.

In the gospel appointed for Ash Wednesday, which I read just a moment ago, Jesus talks about almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, the traditional disciplines of Lent. As we begin the season of Lent, we may choose to engage in acts of charity or to pray more or to fast by giving up something important to us for the 40 days of Lent. Rev. Ellen Schoepf got me thinking about what Jesus is saying here.

As Jesus talks about almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, he says, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them....so whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do." Jesus is saying don't give so that everyone will say, "My, aren't they generous."

He says, when you pray, don't pray so that everyone in the room knows it....or so that people down the block know it. Don't pray so your words go on and on and on. Don't pray just so people will say, "My, they certainly pray well."

He says, when you fast, don't fast so that your face is gaunt and your eyes crazed and your clothes are torn." Don't fast just so people will say, "My, they certainly are religious."

What Jesus is talking about here is making sure that what's showing on the outside matches what's on the inside. He doesn't want us to be hypocrites....a word he uses over and over again in this gospel.

Jesus is asking us to take a look at ourselves. An honest look at ourselves. What are we doing and why are we doing what we do.

On Ash Wednesday, we are reminded of our mortality. As we receive the cross of ashes on our foreheads, we hear the words, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." Those words are really a wake up call to examine ourselves and to get our priorities right.

When I served in a congregation, I was always acutely aware that I would be tracing that cross of ashes on the forehead of someone or maybe several people who would not be with us the next Ash Wednesday because they would die during the coming year. It was emotional to trace that cross of ashes and say "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" on the forehead of an infant.

But the good news is Ash Wednesday is not about us. It is about God and it is about what God has done and about what God continues to do.

God's love for us is so great that God became fully human born as a baby in Bethlehem, experienced all that we do, and then gave his life on the cross, and rose to new life. We share in that new life here and now and for all eternity.

"Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." We can hear echoes of the creation story in those words, when God made human beings from the mud, dirt, and dust of the earth. We may be dust, but we are beloved dust. And God can do amazing things with that dust once it is filled with the very breathe and Spirit of God.

On this Ash Wednesday, we remember with prayer and with the tangible symbol of ashes, the fact that we are mortal – that we don't live forever -, we remember our place in the cycle of life, and we remember our dependence on God. We remember that we have hope in God who created, redeems, and sustains us. We remember that nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. And we remember that God has knit us together in the body of Christ with cords that cannot be broken. God moves us all, through despair and hope, through faith and love, as we find our place, on the path unwinding, in the circle of life. We belong to God. Always have. Always will.

As begin this season of Lent, I would like to conclude by sharing a portion of Psalm 103 with you:

The Lord is merciful and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
God will not always accuse, not keep anger for ever.
God does not deal with us according to our sins,
Nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,

So great is God's steadfast love;
As far as the east is from the west,
So far God removes our transgressions from us.
As a parent has compassion for their children,
So the Lord has compassion.
For God knows how we are made;
God remembers that we are dust.
Amen.