

Ash Wednesday
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Normally as we observe Ash Wednesday, we receive this smudge of a cross and we hear an invitation to contemplate our mortality—“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” But this year, in the midst of a pandemic, as we’re closing in on a full year of Coronavirus precautions—with all the accompanying worries and isolation and loneliness—I think we’ve got awareness of our mortality. We’re not blissfully flying above it all. Instead, we are rooted very solidly in an awareness of our limits, our vulnerability, that this gift of life is a temporary gift. So maybe this year offers an opportunity to delve deeper into the holy wisdom of Ash Wednesday. Maybe today we can hear wisdom about how to receive this beautiful, fragile, temporary gift, and how to live with a sense of hope and peace and joy.

Maybe we can imagine this Ash Wednesday wisdom for how to live as being like a traffic light, with red, yellow and green lights—for Stop, and Caution, and Go. In our worship tonight, the Spirit speaks to us about our lives in ways that tell us to Stop, and to Pay Attention, and to Go.

Perhaps you heard the Spirit’s call to Stop as we confessed together some of the ways we have hurt each other, ways we have acted out of anger or selfishness or envy. It’s as if we have this beautiful, fragile, temporary gift of life, and then we act in ways that damage it even more, that chip away at it, leaving it smaller, less whole, more painful. And the wisdom of Ash Wednesday is a big, flashing red light that says, “Stop.” God wants us to live in harmony with God and with each other, and with all of creation. So the first thing to do is Stop! Stop doing those things that cause pain to ourselves and to others. Stop those things that are driven by fear or selfishness or resentment. The way forward, the way of life and blessing for us and the whole human family, begins with Stopping. We begin our quest for hope and peace and joy by stopping.

Then there’s the yellow light that signals Caution, that calls us to pay attention. If life were only as simple as making better choices, then the path to Utopia would be easy. Just stop making bad choices! But Ash Wednesday flashes a yellow light for us to pay attention to our lives, to notice how we are all connected to each other. We live within a great network of relationships—family and friends, neighbors and co-workers, fellow citizens, all members of the human family. Our lives are all woven together. And together, we are all entangled in a web of choices and consequences that stretch back for generations. That web of choices and consequences creates opportunity for some, and pain and hardship for others, and that also contributes to the damage we do to this beautiful, fragile, temporary gift of life. For example, lifestyle choices and transportation choices and political choices are all connected to global

warming. Investment choices and financial choices are connected to economic exploitation. White privilege is connected to racism and racial oppression. And the great tragedy of our situation is that there is no simple and straightforward way out of the mess we're in. There are no convenient enemies to blame for everything, and there are no clean and pure choices that carry no unintended consequences. The wisdom of Ash Wednesday flashes yellow to help us see that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. This is a hard truth, but essential if we are to avoid being deluded by false hope and pseudo-peace and fake joy.

Finally then, Ash Wednesday shines on us with a beautiful green light, inviting us to Go, to turn to God with our whole heart. My favorite part of the Ash Wednesday service is hearing the words, "God does not wish to condemn us to death for our weakness and failure, but rather desires that we turn again and live in the spirit of love." As we make our way through these weeks of Lent, we'll sing this beautiful invitation each Sunday: "Return to the Lord your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." It isn't that now we're finally going to make ourselves right with God, because this is more than we could ever accomplish. Instead, we turn to God who has already come to us in Jesus with love and forgiveness. Precisely because of everything illuminated by Ash Wednesday's red and yellow lights, God comes to us with grace and mercy and healing. God invites us to know ourselves as God's beloved, forgiven children, treasured and precious in God's sight. And God invites us to find a life truly worth living in Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness, generosity and humility. God comes to us with a way of life and blessing, and invites us to follow in whatever way we are able. It isn't that turning to God is an easy fix for all the problems that bedevil us and our world. Instead, turning to God is a one-day-at-a-time way of being centered in love, so that we can live faithfully with love toward our fellow creatures.

Dear people of God, Ash Wednesday is about so much more than recognizing our mortality. It also teaches us how to treasure this beautiful, fragile, temporary gift that God has entrusted to us. Ash Wednesday teaches us to stop those things that damage this gift, and pay attention to how deeply we are all connected. And most of all, Ash Wednesday tells us to Go, return to God whose grace and mercy speaks peace to our troubled hearts. Go, return to God, whose way of compassion and forgiveness nurtures a durable hope for our unsettled minds. And Go, return to God, in who we find true joy that gives buoyancy to our heavy spirits. And that is how Ash Wednesday teaches us to live. Thanks be to God. Amen.