

A S H W E D N E S D A Y, Mar. 6, 2019

- You have heard me say this before: on Ash Wednesday, *I want to talk about 'nothing in particular.'* That's right ~ I want to talk about "*Nothing!*" Once again, it's not because I've struggled with writer's block, or the problem of starting with a blank canvas. It is because there's 'nothing special' about today. And so, today, if someone later asks you what the preacher talked about, you can safely say, "*he talked about 'nothing in particular'!*"
- **Nothing in particular.** For that is what this day is all about, *how we are really nothing.* Indeed, though it wouldn't sound as good, instead of 'Ash Wednesday' this day could be called, '*Nothing Wednesday.*' That's because **the ashes** at the heart of our liturgy today are **symbolic of nothing.** I *don't* mean they're *empty* of meaning. It's just that *what they mean is nothing.* Ashes represent *nothing of value, nothing of worth.* And that's what makes them a powerful sign. We put them on our foreheads to remind us that, *on our own* and relying on ourselves, we are nothing of value, nothing of worth. That is why we say, when imposing the ashes, that "*you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*" No matter how we try, *we don't give meaning and value to ourselves.* Only God does that.
- As we all know, ashes are the end result of the process of burning. When all the energy has been released from something by burning it, all that remains are ashes, ready to be thrown out. *Ashes are like dust, lifeless, inert, and of no value.* Yet ashes remind us of the dust which God embraced and used in Creation. Taking up the dust of the ground, and fashioning it into human form, God breathed the Holy Spirit into it, making us into God's own image and likeness. In other words, *God took nothing, and made something out of it.* The starting point for God's handiwork was, and always is, nothing. Only **God makes something out of nothing.** Which is why this first day of Lent is about *nothing.* For *without God, every thing is as nothing.*

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- Especially because of our focus on ashes in this liturgy, as well as upon our sin and unworthiness, this day can feel gloomy. And our worship can seem a *sad but necessary duty* before we can move on to happier observances. But actually, *this ought to be the happiest day of the year, if only we would approach it rightly*. If only we could admit *the nothingness* of so much of our lives! We would then have all the more to turn over to God. *For God is a master at taking nothing and making something out of it*. And, by receiving a cross-shaped smudge of ashes, we are reminded that *God finds and embraces our nothingness*.
- What do I mean by this? *Well*, consider all the things that get us down when we think of them... things like the bad choices we have made; relationships we have made difficult; tasks at which we have failed; and responsibilities we have shirked. *These are all things that can just seem like nothing*. Yet, *they are the very things we can lift up and turn over to God, – especially because we can't make anything of them*.
- All these "*nothings*" are like ashes or dust. And dust and ashes are the building blocks of God's Creation. They are also the building blocks of God's Redemptive work. The next time we are tempted to say about something we have done, or are doing, "*O, it's really nothing*," let's *remember what God can do with nothing*. The journey we begin today is a *reverse-logic journey*. In the church's calendar, we go from our starting point today of ashes, toward an endpoint of pentecostal fire. *When we turn it over to God, the Holy Spirit takes the ashen nothingness of our lives and transforms it into the light of the world*. Think about how much *nothingness* we can give to God, to work with, today!

ASH WEDNESDAY, Mar. 6, 2019



Ashes: God's Blank Canvas for (Re-)Making Us

"... then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being."

(Genesis 2:7)

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

(from the liturgy for Ash Wednesday, The Book of Common Prayer, p. 265)