

May I speak to you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Ash Wednesday.

The beginning of Lent.

Ash Wednesday and Lent are often misunderstood and as a generalization often practiced in extremes – militant self-denial or complete carelessness. As with most things in our faith and life, perhaps a middle ground, a both/and is helpful: both purposeful and caring.

The aim of Lent since its inception, as we will read shortly, was predominantly about preparation for baptism back in the day. Always, though, there were themes for all people of the faith for devotion, remembering, and repentance.

Ash Wednesday distinctly stands alone thematically from the rest of Lent. All of Lent is about remembering Jesus' passion and death and seeks to help us encounter our need for God's help: our problem with sin. As we remember, we also see the magnitude of God's provision for us: power and grace.

In contrast, Ash Wednesday stands alone with the message of mortality and penitence. Beyond words, prayers, scriptures, we further symbolically help to encounter this by placing ashes on our foreheads – a symbol, we will of our mortality but also of our penitence.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” – recalling from Genesis chapter three not only mortality but the reality that we are merely creatures. Our power is limited, we rely upon our Creator.

Mortality. This really has two aspects. One is the uncertainty we face in human life (Celebration of Liturgical Time, Alexander). The other is the reality of our destiny to die (Oxford Dictionary). To leave this body and this place.

Ashes as a sign of mortality. Limitation. For end here in this life.

Also, a sign of penitence.

Most times when I hear the word penitence I think of Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade movie. Indiana is trying to get to the Holy Grail and everyone else who has tried has died violently. He is musing aloud as he walks the same path as those who have gone before him: “Only the penitent will pass” he says over and over – “only the penitent will pass.” And then “aha”

– the penitent person is humble – Boom! he drops to his knees, and it saves his life.

Penitence has to do with need, humility, and presence. It also and calls for action or response. It is being aware of who's presence we are in, like Indiana Jones, when we are aware, the action might be to fall to one's knees.

Mortality and penitence. Limitation, need, and awareness of who God is. That is Ash Wednesday. And limitation and need and awareness of who God is sets us up to practice this Lenten season of remembering, devotion, and repentance.

The concept of point of reference and of worldview may help us engage our Lenten journey.

Madeline L 'Engle, in her book *The Love Letters* visually captures point of reference. She wrote – and bear with me, the entire quote bears reading:

“Supposing you were sitting in a train standing still in a great railroad station. And supposing the train on the track next to yours began to move. It would seem to you that it was your train that was moving, and in the opposite direction.

The only way you could tell about yourself, which way you were going, or even if you were going anywhere at all, would be to find a point of reference, something standing still, perhaps a person on the next platform; and in relation to this person, you could judge your own direction and motion. The person standing on the platform wouldn't be telling you where you were going or what was happening, but without [them] you wouldn't know. You don't need to yell out the train window and ask directions. All you need to do is see your point of reference."

Lent is a time to home in our point of reference in this Christian faith. To what or to whom do we look to interpret our journey? Honesty is necessary, and the Lenten tools of showing devotion, practicing repentance, and actively remembering Jesus may serve to expose current places of reference in our lives.

As we home in our point of reference, really what we are doing in some degree is confronting, confirming, or tweaking our worldview.

Worldview is a philosophical term and something we all have. We have formed it actively or passively. And like our identity development, our worldview grows and changes throughout our lives. It consists of answers to three broad questions: who am I? where am I going? How do I get there? Identity questions really.

James Sire (*Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept*) provides a thicker definition – and consider this in our Lenten lens:

“A worldview,” he wrote, “is a commitment, a fundamental commitment of the heart...which we hold about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.”

Worldview is our center of how we live – socially, spiritually, politically, economically. Our worldview shows our hearts and reveals our thinking, while it also helps us interpret ourselves individually and corporately as people.

As we engage Lent, we confirm, confront, or tweak our worldview. What helps us is gazing honestly at our point or points of reference that frame our lives. What do we look to and what do we do about it?

Years ago, I sat at a Lenten retreat at a Catholic monastery with a group of nuns. As we talked, I casually said something like, “Lent is so heavy and intense.” The prioress, who is both a nun and kind of the president of the monastery, turned to me and said, with great intensity, “every day is Lent.” I quickly got in touch with all of my anxiety about nuns from my younger days.

It is only years later that I realize that I think I agree with her. Anything worth practicing, doing, or not doing, to seek God, is really worth doing all year long.

There may be things we let go of in Lent that help us seek God – that will not change after Lent. And there may be things we start to do to help us seek God in Lent. That will not change after Lent either. Everyday really is Lent.

Lent is a special time of discovery, not a heavy weight around our necks. Let us embrace it. Exploring the reality of our mortality, practicing penitence, and observing devotion to God.

Amen.