

“Ashes! Ashes! We all fall down!”

“Ring Around the Rosie” as a nursery rhyme has been around for centuries. Beginning in the 20th century a popular interpretation of the rhyme was that it talked about occurrences of the Bubonic Plague (the end of which, most often, was death ... followed by cremation of the contaminated bodies). While serious examination of the history and versions of the rhyme cast considerable doubt for the plague inspiring its origin, the association of ashes to death, grief, and extreme remorse is as old as history itself. Especially in the history of Middle Eastern culture, ashes, sackcloth, and the tearing of garments has been indicative of great loss, great sorrow, and great sin.

This all becomes relevant this time of year as this last Wednesday was the annual observation of “Ash Wednesday” when some people walking around town could be seen with ashy smudges on their foreheads. If you are a Catholic or a Lutheran (or a member of another “liturgical” church) you may have been one of these people. If you are not, you may have wondered what it was all about.

The observation of Ash Wednesday as the beginning of the season of Lent dates back to the 11th century. As with all the observed “seasons” of the church, it has a specific theme to remind us year after year of a specific reality. The reality is that we are all sinners, and the theme is that of “repentance”; the desire to NOT be sinners. While this is true ANY day of the year, having a season of time set aside to give it special contemplation helps to keep us focused and honest.

The ashes, placed upon the forehead are made from the ashes of last year’s palm fronds of Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday was the day of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem as the Messiah-King of Israel ... but it would only take five days for most of these same people to reject Jesus as their King and change their cry now calling for his death with the words, “Crucify him!” How appropriate that the fronds that heard their words, “Hosanna in the highest!” now be burned to ashes in the furnace of such great sin.

The season of Lent corresponds to the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness perfectly obeying His Father and trusting Him (where we have not). The 40 days of Lent (not including Sundays) also correspond to the 40 years it took the Israelites to learn to trust God completely before they entered into the promised land. And so, the 40 days of Lent are a time of disciplined introspection of our sin, our need for a Savior, and learning to trust God and His provision in repentant faith. It is a time also to prepare us to greet the Risen Lord of Easter Sunday.

On Ash Wednesday ashes are placed upon the forehead, often with God’s words, “From dust you came and to dust you shall return.” Ashes and dust. Remorse and sorrow ... and yet not without hope. For the ashes placed upon the repentant sinner are marked in the shape of the cross. The words that were yelled out on that fateful Friday were terrible words, “Crucify him!” and “Let his blood be upon us and our children”. That cross also was terrible and hatefully murderous.

Yet those words and that cross were absolutely necessary. Sin had to be paid for. Your sin ... and mine. So Jesus paid for it with His own life. And, indeed, his blood HAS been poured over us and our children. By that cross and by that blood, you and I, and our children have been forgiven; rescued from the terrible consequence of our own terrible choices, and offered an eternity of life and joy and freedom from anything and everything that causes pain, loss, sorrow, or death.

Now the cross remains (as terrible as it is) as a precious sign of the depth of God's love to all who fall down at its base in the ashes of repentance and sorrow, but also in the sure and certain hope given them from the One who allowed His life to be given for ours. "Ashes, Ashes, We all fall down" ... only to be lifted up by the loving hand of the One who death could not hold; the One who lives; the One who would call us his beloved.

And so the broken and repentant sinner looks up from the ashes and joins with King David's prayer of joyful hope (after hearing that he had been forgiven),

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." Psalm 51:10