



Wilderness Hell by Leroy Almon, Sr.

ASH WEDNESDAY CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction

For many Christians, Ash Wednesday is a day of reconciliation that sparks renewed hope for transformation. Ash Wednesday, traditionally known as a day of repentance for sins through the public display of ashes, also marks the first day of the 40-day season of Lent leading up to Easter. Ash Wednesday often falls during the last week of February or early March, depending upon when Easter falls during the calendar year. Many Protestant and Catholic churches acknowledge Ash Wednesday with a service by spreading burnt ashes across the foreheads of anyone who participates. In some cases, these ashes come from the burning of blessed palms from the prior year's Palm Sunday. For Christians, Palm Sunday "recalls the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem when his followers shouted 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord-the King of Israel' and scattered palms in his path."¹ The people in Israel glorified Jesus for also resurrecting Lazarus from the dead (John 12:13-17).

Ashes, in the Old Testament, also are associated with mourning and humiliation such as when: Job covered his body with ashes when he mourned his fate (Job 2:8), or when Tamar covered her face with ashes when her brother cast her out (2 Sam 13:13).² These ancient stories have been incorporated over centuries into the sacramental meaning of Ash Wednesday rituals. Today, on Ash Wednesday, “ashes are placed on the foreheads of the faithful to remind them of death, of the sorrow they should feel for their sins, and of the necessity of changing their lives.”³ Ash Wednesday is traditionally considered a day to repent sins, because sins separate God’s people from their community and from God.⁴ Life renewal is important for Christians, because God’s people are promised eternal life through repentance and reconciliation.

Many centuries ago, men and women who sought to be baptized on Easter had to first fast during the Lenten period and receive priesthood teachings.⁵ Therefore, the first day of Lent was designated by priests and bishops to interview all those seeking baptism about their “vices” or sins; and any person guilty of sin was turned away and asked to “amend their life before fasting and baptism.”⁶ Today, Ash Wednesday still carries the traditional religious sentiments about “amending one’s life” and reconciling your sins with God, but it is practiced in diverse ways by individuals and communities. The practice is common among Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists (including AME Churches⁷), and Presbyterians.⁸

II. A Variety of Ways to Observe Ash Wednesday

Some churches do not recognize Ash Wednesday in its historical liturgical form. The churches that do not provide burnt ashes might instead initiate the Lenten season by providing worship and prayer services for those who are fasting, such as is done by The Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York. In another instance, on Ash Wednesday in 2005, several historically black Methodist churches in Los Angeles gathered for the first time to “ceremonially place ashes on worshipers’ foreheads as a sign of humility before God and as a symbol of mourning and sorrow.”⁹ According to the event article posted on the Amos CME Church website, African American clergy gathered to reconcile community separation by bringing the community together “for a time of reflection, introspection, and sacrifice for the kingdom of God.”

While many church services treat the first day of Lent somewhat differently than others, there are also diverse individual and communal meaning-making approaches exercised by African American Christians on this momentous day. Desires for change and for communal support are part of the process through which individuals and communities give meaning to Ash Wednesday as well as subject themselves to a Lenten journey that is unique, transformative and yet often fragile.

III. Historical Reflections for this Moment

Although Ash Wednesday is fundamentally considered a day of repentance, it can also be recognized culturally as a day of reconciliation. Ash Wednesday can be an ideal day to incorporate and recognize powerful moments of reconciliation for African Americans in history, particularly women, given that February is African American History month and March is Women’s History Month.

Moments of reconciliation and hope for transformation look different to each individual. They often take place through forms of resistance, either against oneself, others, or society. This

perspective reminds me of the moment that Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat for a white man on December 1, 1955. She was asked to give up a seat from a section designated to include blacks; if the ten seats reserved for whites were filled, the bus driver forced blacks to give up their seats, making the black section smaller.¹⁰ Now, this was not the first time a black person, including Rosa Parks, resisted the injustices of the bus system. Rosa Parks had been removed from a bus twelve years earlier by the same driver.¹¹ However, this time she resisted and did not give up her seat because, as she said, “I didn’t consider myself breaking any segregation laws...because he was extending what we considered our section of the bus.”¹² I felt just resigned to give what I could to protest against the way I was being treated.”¹³ We can reflect on this day of resistance for Rosa Parks by asking ourselves, **“What must I reconcile with myself first before I resist and anticipate change in the world for greater justice?”**

Rosa Parks knew that, even though it was unjust to reserve seats for whites, she had a right to at least sit in the section designated for Negroes. Allowing ourselves the right to justice must come across clearly to us before we can claim justice for ourselves and for others. For many Christians, reconciling what is considered sinful and in need of forgiveness with what is truly just can challenge self-transformation. Since Ash Wednesday is a traditional day for repenting sins, African American leaders can be empowered and empower other individuals and communities to embrace ourselves by first reconciling our rightful place in the world. Lenten season is often treated as an occasion to exercise forms of resistance, which can be channeled to aid in that inner-self work.

IV. Autobiographical Reflection for the Moment

Growing up in New York City with a Puerto Rican mother and African American step-father helped me create spaces for reconciliation and resistance. As a child, I witnessed many injustices and struggles afflict my parents, such as violence, drugs, and poverty. I also witnessed love, hopes, and dreams for a better life, which I always regarded as survival from the madness within and outside of our home. I have learned to reconcile the dangers of mixing feelings of pain and pleasure, which has taught me to negotiate for myself how to resist injustice and yet entitle myself to the wonders and joys of life.

My parents were not Christians; my grandparents were the Christian voices that always echoed to me, “God is with you. All things are possible if you believe.” The irony of this Christian echoing was that my parents also echoed, “All things are possible if you believe in yourself” but without connections to religious beliefs. To be quite honest, as a teenager I often asked, “Does God have to be with me or not?” As an adult, I have learned to reconcile the value of the different modes of encouragement in my upbringing, because both my parents and grandparents are testimonies of survival and hope for a better world. I now value that I grew up with such religious tensions, because I have learned to reconcile my life in nonjudgmental ways that have helped me accept critical fundamental differences of myself and others. On Ash Wednesday, I reflect on continual self-reconciliation so that I can resist the temptations and distractions that injustices challenge us with. I believe that this was similar to the inner self-work Jesus did during his fasting time in the wilderness.

V. Cultural-Literary Reflection on the Moment

Novels and movies often help us to contemplate the struggles, resilience, and ways in which our communities survive. The novel The Color Purple by Alice Walker, which was produced into a major motion film in 1985 starring actress and activist Whoopi Goldberg as the main character Celie, has been embraced by many people for raising our consciousness about survival modes within black communities. I have read no other novel about black life and struggle which tells its story through letters mostly written to God. This novel can be a cultural literary window to help us imagine ways and possibilities of resistance, reconciliation and transformation while staying close to God during the process. Celie talks to God about ALL that is going on in her life (violence, love, fear, sadness, joys, struggles, and her sister in Africa). This novel, through these letters to God, mirrors the personal sacred spaces that African Americans occupy when engaging in prayer and reflection with God about their individual lives. The individual journeys that people take to reconcile and come to terms with their struggles, desires, and dreams are unique for each person. Reading The Color Purple gives us a glimpse at how people might negotiate their sacred space with God, while at the same time negotiating their lives before and after talking with God.

Ash Wednesday and the Lenten Season are both communal and universal opportunities to share common religious and spiritual ground through prayer and practice. It is a sacred time and space for many individuals on a quest to renew and transform many personal challenges or habits toward healthier, stronger lives mentally, physically, spiritually, and even socially/professionally. Since this biblical and religious tradition embodies many Christian concepts and norms, such as repentance of sins, confessional obligations, and removal of sinful practices, we must celebrate diversity and handle with care the fragility of our African American communities and communities of color at large. Consequently, Ash Wednesday ought to be considered a day of hope, new beginnings, and a stepping off into new challenges. The diversity and complexities of that journey into the Lent process call each individual and community to creatively, faithfully, genuinely, and diligently provide optimal spiritual and mental spaces.

Creating a Safe Moment for Reconciliation and Transformation

Spirit Health – Ash Wednesday, or the first day of Lent, is a momentous day for Christians to renew or seek spiritual health and healing. History shows us that this Christian tradition has evolved and allowed greater personal flexibility to reconcile with God in unique and independent ways. Since our African American communities face a myriad of social issues, such as domestic and street violence, unemployment, discrimination (race, gender and sexuality), mental and physical health challenges, homelessness, immigration, and ex-imprisonment, it is critical to move with the change of history and authentically accept and affirm through inclusive language ALL folks at the table of worship and ash giving.

Mental Health – Christian attitudes toward amending life and doing away with sin is also shared by fragile people who are depressed, with drug addictions such as alcoholism, and with mental disorders. Some facing these challenges will use Ash Wednesday as a reconciliatory day with themselves and society and attempt to renew their lives by searching for ways to overcome their drug addictions and their depressed mental states. Many often want to abruptly stop drinking or remove the coping mechanisms that help manage their depression. Such situations can be as extreme as leaving a violent spouse or quitting a job. Ash Wednesday, or the first day of Lent, can be a time to reconcile community love and intervention by embracing and walking journeys with those facing very difficult challenges. Preachers and others must use caution to not identify

church members or private conversations relating to such issues, neither must advice about how to respond to such issues be given publically. Many people with drug addictions and mental disorders, whether on medications or not, are not prepared to kick any drug behaviors or leave abusive behaviors without supervision. Some of these people might be at risk for suicide or might endanger the lives of others. Congregations must be encouraged to consult mental health providers for assistance.

Dealing with these types of complicated social issues requires clergy to be prepared to provide a safe spiritual space and direct these issues through the proper social services channels. Congregants can be encouraged to buddy with someone or join a group for support during Lent. The church community can participate in the Lent process of amending community life. During the 2005 Ash Wednesday celebration in Los Angeles that I mentioned earlier, Rev. Leslie White said, "As we journey through the Lenten season, we embark on the same 40-day period that Jesus fasted and prayed in the wilderness prior to beginning his public ministry. As we consider how we too might become living sacrifices to God, we must consider the needs of the community around us."¹⁴

Body Health – Moving in the Lent spirit of reconciling community love and intervention, congregations must be reminded not to fast without supervision from their physicians if they have diabetes, renal problems, hypertension, cancer and other illnesses. Many people will take this time to remove unhealthy items from their diets, such as sugar, salt and fried food during this season. While the desire to make these changes is admirable, diabetics and those with other illnesses must be monitored closely even with removal of high amounts sugar and salt from diets.

VI. Prose and Poetic Reflections for Ash Wednesday

A Prayer for Endurance – by William Edward Burghardt Du Bois

In the midst of life and deeds it is easy to have endurance and strength and determination, but Thy Word, O Lord, teaches us, that this is not enough to bring good to the world--to bring happiness and the worthier success. For *this* we must endure to the end, learn to finish things, to bring them to accomplishment and full fruition. We must not be content with plans, ambitions and resolves; with part of the message or part of an education, but be set and determined to fulfill the promise and complete the task and secure the full training. Such men and women alone does God save by lifting them above and raising them to higher worlds and wider prospects. Give us, O God, to resist today the temptation of shirking, and the grit to endure to the end. Amen.¹⁵

Through Song - Precious Lord, Take My Hand (1932) – by Thomas Andrew Dorsey

Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand,
Thru the storm, thru the night,
Lead me on to the light,
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.

When my way grows drear, precious Lord, linger near,
When my life is almost gone,
Hear my cry, hear my call,
Hold my hand lest I fall;
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.

When the darkness appears and the night draws near,
And the day is past and gone,
At the river I stand,
Guide my feet, hold my hand;
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.¹⁶

Through a Poem - by Octavia E. Butler

All that you touch You Change.
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth
Is Change.
God
Is Change.¹⁷

Through a Reflection from Maya Angelou

Many things continue to amaze me, even well into the sixth decade of my life. I'm startled or taken aback when people walk up to me and tell me they are Christians. My first response is the question, "Already?" It seems to me a lifelong endeavor to try to live the life of a Christian. I believe that is also true for the Buddhist, for the Muslim, for the Jainist, for the Jew, and for the Taoist who try to live their beliefs. The idyllic condition cannot be arrived at and held on to eternally. It is in the search itself that one finds the ecstasy.¹⁸

Through a Reflection from James Baldwin

To be with God is really to be involved with some enormous, overwhelming desire, and joy, and power which you cannot control, which controls you. God is a means of liberation and not a means to control others.¹⁹

Through a Reflection from Pastor Yvette A. Flunder

People on the edge must be encouraged to form a concept of a loving God who desires to have intimate relationship with his/her creation.²⁰

VII. Conclusion

I conclude this unit on Ash Wednesday with words that all members of the African American faith community would do well to ponder as we repent some behaviors and pray for courage to embrace others during the season of Lent. Theologian Delores S. Williams writes in Sisters in the Wilderness:

The black church is invisible, but we know it when we see it: our daughters and sons **rising up** from death and addiction recovering and recovered; our mothers in poverty raising their children alone, **with God's help**, making a way out of no way and succeeding; Harriet Tubman leading hundreds of slaves into freedom; Isabel, the former African American slave, with God's help, **transforming destiny** to become Sojourner Truth, affirming the close relation between God and woman; Mary McLeod Bethune's college starting on a garbage heap with one dollar and fifty cents growing into a multimillion dollar enterprise; Rosa Parks sitting down so Martin Luther King, Jr., could stand up. The black church is invisible, but we know it when we see oppressed people rising up in freedom. It is community essence, ideal and real as God works through it **on behalf of the survival, liberation and positive, productive quality of life of suffering people.**²¹ (Bold mine)

VIII. Recommended Books

Daley, Fay. A Call to Fast: Taking a Spiritual Journey. This book, authored by an Afro-Caribbean Christian woman, provides an excellent and balanced approach to fasting. Highly recommended.

Burns, Khephra and Susan L. Taylor. Confirmation: The Spiritual Wisdom That Has Shaped Our Lives. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1997.

McKenzie, Vashti M. Journey to the Well, 12 Lessons on Personal Transformation. New York, NY: Penguin Compass, 2002. This book is ideal for someone preparing for Lent.

Walker, Alice. The Color Purple. New York, NY: Pocket Books/Simon & Shuster, 1982.

IX. Other Resources

IMPORTANT: Churches should be equipped with information about local resources to make immediate referrals for those with mental health issues and general health issues, when necessary. All clergy and church leaders should be able to quickly share this information with others.

Notes

1. The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth ed. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007. pp. 36, 254.
2. "Lent: Tracing the Traditions of Lenten Ashes, Palms." Catholic Spirit. Feb. 2008. Online location: http://www.austindiocese.org/newsletter_article_view.php?id=2388 accessed 3 November 2008
3. The Columbia Encyclopedia. p. 385.
4. "Lent: Tracing the Traditions of Lenten Ashes, Palms." Catholic Spirit.

5. Coakley, John W. and Andrea Sterk. Readings in World Christian History. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005. pp. 162-163.
6. Ibid.
7. This church has an Ash Wednesday worship service. St. Luke Chronicle. Online location: <http://www.stlukebaptist.org/Chronicle07a-1.pdf> accessed 3 November 2008
8. The Columbia Encyclopedia. p. 385.
9. Taylor, Kevin. "Black Methodists Begin Lenten Season with Worshipful Reflection; Joint Ash Wednesday Service Feb. 9." Amos A.M.E. Church, Los Angeles, CA. Online location: <http://www.amoscme.com/vsItemDisplay.dsp&objectID=6292603A-60A6-4E58-8255D869AEEF3D00&method=display> accessed 3 November 2008
10. Smith, Jessie Carney. Black Heroes. Canton, MI: Visible Ink Press, 2001. p. 530.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Taylor, Kevin. "Black Methodists Begin Lenten Season with Worshipful Reflection; Joint Ash Wednesday Service Feb. 9." Amos Memorial CME Church. Online location: <http://www.amoscme.com/vsItemDisplay.dsp&objectID=6292603A-60A6-4E58-8255D869AEEF3D00&method=display> accessed 3 November 2008
15. Washington, James M. Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1994. p. 106.
16. Ibid., at 154.
17. Burns, Khephra and Susan L. Taylor. Confirmation: The Spiritual Wisdom that Has Shaped Our Lives. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1997. p. 267.
18. Ibid., at 219.
19. Ibid., at 253.
20. Flunder, Yvette A. Where the Edge Gathers: Building a Community of Radical Inclusion. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005. p. 8.
21. Williams, Delores S. Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk. New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1993. pp. 205-206.