**Ash Wednesday**

**O daughter of my people, gird yourself with sackcloth and wallow in ashes;**

**make for yourself mourning, as for an only son, most bitter lamentation;**

**for the plunderers shall suddenly come upon you.**

**(*Jeremiah 6:26)***

**The first day of Lent is called Ash Wednesday from the custom that prevailed in the early Church of sprinkling ashes on the heads of penitents on the first day of Lent, in token of repentance for sin. Ash Wednesday comes forty-six days before Easter. There are six Sundays in Lent, and they are not considered part of Lent, because in the Western church Sunday is always a feast day. The forty week-days following Ash Wednesday constitute Lent. *(Charles Fillmore, in Keep A True Lent, p. 138)***

**Mom: “Hey, little Heart, what are you giving up for Lent? Tomorrow is Ash Wednesday, ya know.” Heart: “Can I give up homework?” Mom: “No, you know the rules. It has to be something you like.” Heart: “Fine. I give up dancing the Hoochie Coochie in my underwear in front of the entire P. T. A.” Mom: “Something within reason.” Heart: “But you gotta admit, that sounds pretty fabulous.” *(Mark Tatulli, in Heart of the City comic strip)***

**Mardi Gras is a French term meaning “Fat Tuesday.” It came from the custom of parading a fat ox through the streets of Paris on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. The fat ox symbolized the merrymaking of a meat feast before the fasting required on the next day’s onset of Lent. *(Charles Reichblum, in Knowledge in a Nutshell, p. 231)***

**Back in the ‘70s, Elizabeth Taylor starred in a movie about a middle-aged woman whose husband, she fears, is abandoning her because she is no longer young. The movie chronicles the myriad ways she tries to erase or deny the reality of her mortality. Painful cosmetic surgeries, acquisition of expensive clothes, and association with younger people cannot change what is happening, nor does it prevent the loss of her husband. He leaves her because she convicts him of his own mortality from which he is still running. The film is entitled Ash Wednesday, and Ash Wednesday and the subsequent days of Lent confronts us with what Elizabeth Taylor faced: our humanity. A frightening day, not so much because of what we have done, but of who we are – a collection of bones – dry, bleached bones. And it is the coming to terms with who we are that is at the heart of Lent! Yet, while that is frightening, it also offers freedom from that fear. It offers us restoration through God’s Spirit, a breathing into us of new life, a transformation of this mortal life to an eternal and peaceful one. *(LectionAid)***

**3 Things to Know About Ash Wednesday:**

**What’s the purpose of Ash Wednesday? It marks first day of the 40 days of Lent, a roughly six-week period (not including Sundays) dedicated to reflection, prayer and fasting in preparation for Easter. It ends on Holy Thursday, the fifth day of Holy Week (the week leading up to Easter) that marks the Last Supper. In addition to certain rules about foods and fasting, many Christians (and even non-Christians) abstain from additional foods, luxury or material goods or certain activities and habits.**

**Where do the ashes some people put on their face come from? They’re obtained from the burning of the palms of the previous Palm Sunday, which occurs on the Sunday before Easter, and applied during services. Palm Sunday marks Jesus’ return to Jerusalem, when people waved palm branches to celebrate his arrival. The ashes are typically mixed with Holy Water or oil.**

**What do the ashes mean? The ashes, applied in the shape of a cross, are a symbol of penance, mourning and mortality. Centuries ago, participants used to sprinkle themselves with ashes and repent much more publicly, but the practice fell away sometime between the 8th-10th century before evolving into what it is today. There aren’t any particular rules about how long the ashes should be worn, but most people wear them throughout the day as a public expression of their faith and penance. *(***[***Nolan Feeney***](http://time.com/author/nolan-feeney/)***)***

**One evening my husband and I were talking about our wills. I asked him, if he should go first, what funeral arrangements he would like. He told me he wanted to be cremated and have his ashes scattered over Catalina Island. “Why Catalina?” I asked. “Because I’ve never been there before.” *(Sylvia Anderson, in Reader’s Digest)***

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