

From the ashes: Can we create a world where we don't need to repent?

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After a day of parades and beads, many may be waking this morning to head to church for the imposition of ashes. For Christians, Tuesday was Shrove Tuesday or Mardi Gras. We have two labels for the same day: one related to the word shrive, meaning to confess or to give absolution, and the other a French term for Fat Tuesday, to reflect a day of indulgence before weeks of self-deprivation. Either way, Christians now cross into the season of Lent.

Lent is the 40 days, not counting Sundays, leading up to Easter. The word Lent comes from the Middle English word for spring. Early Christian communities used these days as a time of preparation: Candidates were prepared for baptism, and those who were already baptized prepared to celebrate Easter's dawn anew. These efforts usually focused on repentance and penitence. Today, people often give up something during Lent: soda, chocolate, meat, TV, etc. The point is to stop doing things we think are bad for us or to deprive ourselves of pleasure.

Several years ago, I pondered Lenten practices after a conversation with a Muslim friend. He and his family were engaged in their annual fast for Ramadan. During their holy season, they gave up eating during the day and ate only small, simple meals at night. They did not skip meals to do penance, but rather to refocus their souls. Their fast was a way to remember those who often go without their daily bread and to bring that awareness into their daily living. Every hunger pang was a reminder.

Today, Ash Wednesday, Lent begins. At the church I serve, we follow the ancient practice of saving palm fronds from the celebration of Palm Sunday during Holy Week. Nearly a year later, the fronds are sere and brittle. I will place their lifeless bodies in the oven and bake them into ashes. Their verdant aroma will mingle with a slight burning scent. Then I will crush them into a fine powder and mix them with a bit of healing oil. The result will be a smudging paste. The "Hosannas" and hopes of Palm Sunday, now forgotten and broken, will be transformed into a multi-sensory smear to remind us to try again.

There are certainly actions for which we need to repent. We are a country at war, a country where millions go hungry, and a country that has debated the ethics of torture. However, sometimes I wonder whether it is easier—and perhaps more fruitful—to focus on what we want to become and not where we have failed. A bumper sticker I sometimes see pushes the point: "Wage Peace!" If we focused on peacemaking, we would not need to repent for war or torture. If we took greater notice of those who were hungry and actively did our part to feed them—and to change the systems that failed them—we wouldn't need to deprive ourselves to share their suffering.

Did you celebrate a Shrove Tuesday of preparation for renewal or a Fat Tuesday of engorgement? Either way, today we are invited to smudge our forgotten brokenness on our foreheads and begin again. Today we can begin to move from a spiritual winter to the dawn of spring.

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