
Ash on Our Foreheads and on Our Feet

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Ash Wednesday – Year C



Last weekend, on the Saturday before Lent, I was quite cold. I was down in the beautiful winter woods of middle Georgia where I grew up. I was also in the pastures there, on our old farm, helping my brother. Over the past year, those rolling pastures have grown up with things we don't like. There are briars and small sweet gum trees. Oh, my Lord! The bane of sweet gum trees in the South!

Lots of invasive species have sprung up in those pastures, but lots of the good grass species have also grown too high. They simply needed to be cut back. But we didn't cut those things back last Saturday. We burned them. My brother, and my father, and my son - all of us together - spent the day burning the pastures and woods.

It's always a bit risky, even dangerous, to set an intentional fire. Don't worry; my brother had called the forestry service to notify them of the burn! And my brother knows what he is doing. We were doing something most every tender of pastures and woods has done over the centuries. Native Americans burned that same land at one time, providing clear browsing areas for deer and other forms of nourishment.

In burning, we were getting rid of invasive species, and we were also preparing the soil for the growth of new things. Pastures need clearing. Woods need their undergrowth burned away from time to time. Afterwards, the ash is messy - it makes your boots black when you walk there afterwards - but the ash is also healthy. The ground is nourished and fertilized by that ash.

So the fire burns, yes, but it also nourishes. And, on a cold Saturday in the winter time, the fire also warms us. Dangerous as it was, we tried to stand as close to the fire as possible, so close that ashes were landing on our feet.

At its best, the confession of sin is a lot like burning pastures. When we confess our sins - daily, or weekly, or annually, like on Ash Wednesday - we are clearing the land in order for something else to grow. The confession of sin is a good and fertilizing thing, especially if we understand sin to be whatever hinders the growth of God's presence in our lives.

Confessing sin means letting go of it, burning it away, getting rid of whatever it is in our lives that is hindering new growth.

That is how I propose a definition of sin in our time: whatever it is that hinders new growth in our lives.

God wants to grow things in our lives. God wants to grow *new* things in our lives! But the old growth is often in the way. That old growth might be some invasive species that has come into our life over time. But that old growth might also be perfectly good plants, good things that simply need to be pruned and cut back and allowed to flourish again in fresh ways.



Ash Wednesday, then, is a day to burn something away.

Lent is a season to burn things away. These late winter days, cold and gray, are excellent days in which to build a fire. Yes, the fire can be risky and dangerous. Sometimes it burns too close and hurts us. But it also burns away those things that hinder us from the newness of God.

On Ash Wednesday, many Christians mark their foreheads with ashes. Some Christians wear the ashes all day, while some quietly wipe the ashes away during the day. It doesn't matter how long we wear them. The point is that, even for a moment, those ashes are signs that we have burned something away.

The ashes of Ash Wednesday are reminders that we are making room for God. We are clearing the pasture of our soul for new growth. Whether you are at church today or not, and whether you are a Christian or not - wherever and whoever you are - I hope you are creating space for God. I hope you are walking on good ground, humble ground that has known fire and ash, ground that is fertile and ready for new life. Don't be afraid of fire and ashes. They are the signs of new life growing within you.