



I heard a story about a woman who went to Mass on Ash Wednesday. When she came home, her husband, who was a not religious man, asked her why she had dirt on her head. The wife explained to him about ashes and Lent, about offering sacrifices to God and that it was a very holy time of the year. The man was so impressed with what his wife told him that he said he would join her in fasting for Lent and that he would give up chocolate. His wife was very happy with his decision. So, when she woke up the next morning and came down stairs for coffee, she saw him eating a chocolate covered donut. She said *what about Lent?* He said to her, *is it still Lent?*

Sometimes, we may feel that way about Lent as the forty days of this sacred time continue. Is it still Lent? I find Ash Wednesday to be one of the most fascinating days of the entire year in the parish where I serve. I would say that we give out ashes to close to 3000 people. Most Sundays, we have about 1500 people at our Masses. Some people can get cynical about what are sometimes called *A and P Catholics*, ashes and palms. However, I do not feel that way at all. I am thrilled to see so many people come and receive ashes. There would be those who complain that many people really do not understand what is the meaning of the ashes, or perhaps see it as was mere ritual that somehow might help them or protect them. What I see in almost everyone who comes for ashes, whether they come to Mass daily or only a few times a year, is a powerful grace from God. For that moment as the ashes are placed on his/her forehead, the person hears this prayer: *Repent and believe in the Good News of Jesus*, or even more moving, *remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return*. What brings them and us to want to hear these words? Why in a society that spends a fortune on lotions, creams, and even facial surgeries, do we want to walk

around with ashes on our faces? I believe the answer lies in the heart of soul of every human being. We come from God, and one day we will return to God. However healthy and beautiful our bodies are, we know in the core of our being that they will someday eventually weaken and break down. I get a kick out of hearing people say something like this: *If I die, I want this song played at my funeral.* I have even said such words myself. The words that make me smile are: *if I die.* When we say this, we are presuming we may be the one exception, other than Jesus Christ, who may not die. Every person who has ever lived will die, but I am not too sure about me. Still, the ashes on our head are a vivid reminder of that reality. Many people who receive ashes may have forgotten that stark reality by the time we get back to their pew. But for a brief time they come face to face with the haunting questions: why am I alive? What is my life about? What happens when my life ends? Every human being at some time or other in his/her life, and very often more than once, comes face to face with these questions.

In our first reading today from the *Book of Exodus*, we heard the dramatic encounter between God and Moses on Mount Horeb:

"Moses! Moses!"

He answered, "Here I am." God said, "Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.

I am the God of your fathers," he continued "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

You and I, like Moses, are standing on Holy Ground. This earth is the same earth that Jesus Christ walked. We look at the same sun, moon, stars and skies as did he. We breathe the same air. Jesus is The Word made flesh and who dwells among us; he took flesh and is like us in all things but sin. God comes to us the wonder of nature, in the gift of love shared with family and friends, in the treasure of our faith that comes to us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We do not see a burning bush; no, but we do see the Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, given to us out of divine love. We hear the Word of God proclaimed to us from the Scriptures. Our faith community, made up of people all various ages and backgrounds, perhaps a mixture of saints and

sinners, is holy ground. We are the Body of Christ.

When Moses meets God in the burning bush, he is frightened and wants to hide. Today, in our modern society, we may not even notice the burning bush. We are too busy with a litany of activities, diversions and distractions. I might be able to give up chocolate for Lent, but do not ask me to give up my cell phone. That is too much. So, in these last weeks of Lent, look and see the burning bushes that surround you. God is seeking to capture our minds and hearts.

I love the words of the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning

*Earth's crammed with heaven and every
common bush afire with God, But only he who
sees takes off his shoes; the rest sit round
and pluck blackberries."*