

This evening we begin the season of Lent with the observance of Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent have a long history in the Church, and I would like to explore some of that history with you. In order to understand this season we have to go back in time, back to the city of Nicaea, back to the year 325 AD. It was there, in the great city of Nicaea that bishops from all over the known world met to discuss the various challenges facing the Church. What they finally decided upon continues to shape the Church today. We pay homage to this great council every time we say the Nicene Creed. It was at the council of Nicaea that the 40 day season of Lent was established as a long period of preparation in order to make ready for the resurrection of Christ. This 40 day length was not a random choice, though, but was based instead on the numerology found in the Bible. Numbers, as you may know, play a crucial role in the Bible and the number 40 holds great religious significance for God's people. Noah and his family floated in the ark for 40 days and nights while the Lord flooded the earth. Moses was atop Mt. Sinai for 40 days to receive the 10 commandments. After the exodus out of Egypt, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Jesus Himself was tested in the wilderness by Satan for 40 days, and He spent 40 days on this earth between His resurrection and ascension. What you discover when you survey the use of the number 40 in the Bible is it usually signifies period of trial or testing. This fact guided the council to settle on 40 days for the season of Lent. The length of time would serve as a perfect reminder to all Christians of their own personal testing and trials upon this earth. We all have our own battles to contend with in the barren wilderness of temptation. We spend our lives fighting against sin, death and the power of the devil. We seek to lead godly lives in what we say and do. Lent provides us with just such a concentrated opportunity to fight against our own sinful habits, lay aside our own hatred and animosity, focus on our hope in Christ, practice charity and devote ourselves to inner purification and penance of sins past.

A few decades after the council, the practice of marking the forehead with ashes was introduced. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century this was a universally adopted sign of repentance and a visible reminder of our human mortality. Again, the practice was established based on the principles of the Bible. After Adam and Eve's fall into sin, and as a consequence for mankind's disobedience, death entered the world. From dust, God had created mankind, and now, because of sin, mankind would return to the dust from which they had been taken and formed. In the Old Testament after a death of a loved one or some other great tragedy, you hear of God's people mourning in

sackcloth and ashes. This period of mourning and sadness is reflected well in the season of Lent. We too mourn for the sins we commit in our daily lives. We are deeply grieved for the way our sins not only hurt us, but others, and especially God Himself. Contrary to worldly thought, sin is not joke; it's not cute or trite or funny. As Christians, we take our sins seriously knowing the wages of each and every sin is death. We wear the ashes on our forehead as a visible reminder of this morbid truth: "dust we are and to dust we shall return". Since righteousness and unrighteousness cannot dwell together, our sins cast us out of God's presence. The blackness of our sins is reflected in the blackness of the ashes that mark our foreheads for all the world to see.

To that end, very early on in the worship life of God's people, the Church began to omit the singing of Alleluias. After all, what right do we have to sing praises to God? We, who sit outside the walls of the city of God, must mourn in ashes. Alleluia is a word of life, a word that expresses our hope for God and His Kingdom. We know that left to ourselves we would surely die in our sins, having never entered God's great city or joined the hosts of heaven in singing Alleluia.

Yes, Lent is meant to be a somber season, a season of repentance and abstinence. A season in which we reflect on the darkness of our sins and the banishment from God's presence we rightfully deserve. But Lent is not all sadness and gloom and mourning. There is a hope to be found...even in Lent. The ashes that I use this evening are not just ashes from my fireplace. They are ashes from palm branches used for the Palm Sunday celebration. On that day we celebrated Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem as He rode on a donkey towards His death on the cross. There is our hope. The ashes will be applied to your forehead in the shape of the cross to remind you that Christ died for *your* sins. There is your hope. Even the word *Lent* expresses hope. The word *Lent* literally means springtime. Now, we sit in darkness, in the cold winter of discontent. But not forever. Spring is coming, when extended light and warmth will return to the earth. Christ, the light of the world, is coming. He is coming soon. And upon His arrival darkness will flee and the warmth of God's presence will be felt by all of God's people. For now we wait, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. Soon our waiting will be at an end, but not yet. Soon we will reach the haven of our eternal repose and we will lend our voices to the great choirs of heaven praising God eternally in a world without end. But for now, we wait. Amen.