

On Ash Wednesday we receive the mark of the cross on our foreheads and hear the words, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” These words and this marking of ashes on our foreheads is a radical reminder of our condition as mortal humans. The Bible reminds us that we are sinners and that the wages of sin are death. But the Bible also tells us of God’s rescue mission in Jesus. That rescue mission takes the shape of a cross. In the cross of Jesus we are ransomed, set free, redeemed from sin, death and the power of the devil. Lent is the time in the church year when we begin a 40 day pilgrimage that reminds us of the high cost of our salvation. That pilgrimage begins on Ash Wednesday and the mark of the cross in ashes on our foreheads.

We do not pass through this season of Lent as if the events it marks were happening for the first time. We already know how the story ends. (“Images of the Season”, *Sundays and Seasons*, Cycle B 2000, p. 142.) The story includes the suffering of Jesus, his betrayal and arrest, his crucifixion and death. But we also know the rest of the story...namely the resurrection. So for us, Lent is a time of reflection on the cross and the cost of our salvation.

St. Paul said it best in the epistle lesson for tonight. “For we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (I Cor. 1:22-24)

Lutherans have always been focused on the cross as the means of our salvation. That is not to say that we have ignored the glories of the resurrection but the resurrection is best understood and best celebrated and best appreciated only when the cross precedes it. It is like the gift of health. We don’t appreciate the value of good health until we are gravely ill. We don’t appreciate the day until we have experienced the night. We don’t value peace until we have experienced the high cost of war. In the same way we can not know the high cost of our salvation of our salvation unless we first stand before the cross and face the stark reality of death.

But the Lenten season also points us beyond death to the resurrection. An example is one of the readings for the first Sunday in Lent, this coming Sunday. In the O.T. reading this Sunday we will hear the story of the fall in

Genesis and our banishment from the Garden of Eden. But there is also the hope of forgiveness in the promise of a savior to come.

And so as you receive the sign of the cross in ashes on your forehead you are experiencing a double truth; you are reminded that you are mortal, born in sin and alienated from God, deserving of punishment, yet embraced for all eternity by the God who forgives your sin in Jesus.

The ashes of Ash Wednesday are a mark of death, a promise of forgiveness, a sign of hope, and a confession of faith. It took the cross of Jesus to make this all happen.

Why did it have to be a cross? Why couldn't God have used a more civilized method for bringing salvation to the world? Why not utter one thundering word like when he created the universe – one word to set things right again...the word "FORGIVEN!"

Why the cross? That's what we will consider in this Lenten Season. For the next 5 Wednesday evenings our worship will focus on "Why Did Jesus, the King of Angels, Have to Die?" We will consider 5 different answers to that question.

Our answers can only guess at the full reason. "For our thoughts are not God's thoughts and our ways not God's ways"...and "the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." (I Cor. 1:25).

But we can try to answer:

1) You measure the enormity of a problem by the difficulty of the solution. So with the sin of the world. To require the death of the Son of God tells us something of the scope of the problem, the complexity of our sin that reaches into the depths of our being and entwines itself around even our souls. To root out this poisonous weed that kills and separates us from God for all eternity – to root it out takes great effort, and it is not something we can do ourselves. So God does it for us – he goes into death himself to conquer death.

2) Why the cross? God wanted to identify totally with us. He suffered unjustly – to identify with those who are abused and shamefully treated for no cause.

He suffered the cruelty of man's inhumanity to man to identify with those who are treated cruelly.

He suffered pain and death so that you might call upon him in your hour of death.

God limited his freedom to choose a painless death, or a quick and easy death, or even an honorable death. God is involved in the pain and sorrow of life, in the terrible, painful reality of suffering and death.

3) Why the cross? Was it to light a candle of hope in the midst of darkness? To shine a light into the darkness of the grave? To give hope to the human spirit in a sometimes hopeless world?

4) Why the cross? The best answer we can give is to simply point to the overwhelming love of our Heavenly Father.

You are God's children – He made you for himself. You belong to him. And even though you rebel against Him you remain the object of His never-ending love. And so Jesus came from heaven to do battle with sin and death and the devil that hold you in bondage and by his death on the cross Jesus gave you the forgiveness of sins and the promise of everlasting life. Indeed, **“God shows his love for us, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”** (Rom. 5:8) And for this great love all we can say is, “Thanks be to God.”
AMEN