

Reflection for Ash Wednesday

Feb. 17, 2021

Paula Cooney, IHM

Blow the trumpet! Call an assembly! Gather the people! Notify the congregation! For **this** is an acceptable time!

This is certainly a different Ash Wednesday isn't it?

Although not a "holy day of obligation" this is one of those days when the Catholic faithful "turn up" to get the mark of ashes on their foreheads. As a public-school kid, I was very proud to be wearing the sign of my Catholicity to school although I'm quite sure that I was very clear on what it was all about.

The words back then were a little intimidating: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

In other words, "you'd better get yourself straightened out before it's too late." Not a very positive way of entering into this Holy Season.

Most often the greeting we hear today is, "Repent, and believe the Good News."

Perhaps the invitation needs to be reversed: Believe the Good News and repent.

Believe that the Good News is SO good that we are willing to open our minds and hearts to the kind of metanoia that allows its power and possibility to take hold of us – individually AND as a community – so that God is free to do something entirely new and wonderful through us.

The invitation that Isaiah offers us will demand such metanoia:

- Release those bound unjustly.
- Free the oppressed.
- Break every yoke.
- Removing from our midst oppression, false accusation, malicious speech.

Our nation, our world – Earth itself – is crying out to humankind: METANOIA! TURN!

- I can't breathe.
- Black Lives Matter.
- Unprecedented hurricane seasons – massive wildfires – frigid weather where it should be warm and hot weather where it should be cool.
- Elderly Asian Americans being mugged on the streets of Oakland.
- Caged children at our border/camps of immigrants growing throughout the world.
- Gun violence/trafficking/opioid addiction.
- The Capitol has been breached.

“Metanoia changes everything.” Do I – do we – believe it can be so?

Because of the coronavirus our ritual for receiving ashes will be different. The ashes will be placed in our hands and we will place them on our own foreheads.

No one will do it for us. What words might we use as we receive them in our hand – and with what blessing will we place them on ourselves? What will this mark of connectedness with all humankind – and, yes, with all of creation mean for each of us – and for us as a community this year?

Isaiah promises us that

*Light shall rise in the darkness and the gloom shall become for you like midday.
God will renew your strength, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a
spring whose water never fails.*

And a young Black woman on the steps of the Capitol reminds us:

When day comes we step out of the shade,
afame and unafraid
the new dawn blooms as we free it
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it
if only we're brave enough to be it.

Amanda Gorman

Let us then receive the mark of ashes – a sign of our oneness with all that is – a commitment to unfolding of the kingdom in our lives – in our world.

Metanoia!