

People say they love spring, but that season of transformation brings serious challenges. Unpredictable weather can frustrate our plans. Filing our taxes dims the spirits of even the most cheerful people. I had to explain to a gracious and well-intentioned colleague who was trying to organize “Ashes to go” that I wouldn’t be joining her effort because I object to the whole concept. But just like the season of Lent, which begins today, the trials of spring are a backdrop to growth and we know the story will have a happy ending.

Lent begins with ashes, and ashes are a powerful but complex symbol. The Hebrew Bible describes people covering themselves in ashes and coarse cloth to express either their grief at the loss of a loved one or their sorrow for having sinned, and their intention to lead a better life. So ashes symbolize loss, among other things, but loss is not always a bad thing.

Some habits and mistakes are better off lost; some weights need to be cast off; some burdens need to be lifted before we can stand tall again. Even this somber symbol carries with it a glimmer of hope: hope that we can be restored and renewed, hope that our efforts to be better people will not be in vain, hope that life can come even out of death. And so we see the Holy Spirit hard at work, working wonders even with ashes.

Offering ashes alone, outside of the context of the Eucharist, denies people the beautiful, and immensely hopeful, message of this day. And we receive this message not just with a very wordy liturgy, but also with movement. The Spirit works within us, I think particularly in the moments when each of us will arise from our places and approach the Altar, first for ashes, then for the Sacrament.

Getting up and moving is a moment when hope is transformed into faith, and faith into action. For ashes, bread, and wine are not merely to be seen and understood from a distance. They are also meant to touch us and change us as we allow them to come into contact with our bodies, our bodies God created as a sign of God’s goodness and love, our bodies like the body God took on, and gave up, to reveal how much God loves us and share that love with all of us in a new way.

Moving once to accept the ashes, and again the bread and the wine, means we have hope that they will change us in a positive way. We respond to God’s promises, God’s offer, with faith enough that we will give God the opportunity to work within us, even though we know that we can’t predict just how God will change us through the Spirit’s presence. So our observance today is an act of profound trust in a God we can’t fully understand, but a God who has shown awesome love for us. We move, therefore, in hope that God’s love for us endures.

In this way, the symbol of the ashes is made complete in us. Ashes alone signal only an ending, a loss. But ashes, combined with our acceptance of them, and the Church’s proclamation of God’s love for us and God’s power to heal us, ashes so used become symbols of hope and new life. For with our faithful understanding and action, in

the context of the Eucharist, the ashes do the impossible — they grow to symbolize God's forgiveness and God's reconciliation, God's response to our needs and shortcomings. What had a moment ago symbolized loss now, through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, is transformed to symbolize the treasures of heaven, which can never be reduced by fire, never threatened by natural or man-made losses.

This is an important reminder every year, but especially important as the Russian invasion of Ukraine threatens not only individual lives, and not only the integrity and sovereignty of a peaceful democracy, but also the entire international order. We might fairly ask what good working on our own relationships with God could do, or whether that work is appropriate at all, with this crisis raging.

I would first emphasize that one of the fruits of this work is the increase in our compassion, especially for those who are suffering the most, at the expense of our pride, self-righteousness, and self-importance. Another fruit is an improved capacity for honest moral reasoning in general, which should include a more realistic sense not just of our own flaws, but also of our own goodness, and crucially, a better sense of where our efforts and resources can have the greatest impact. The work of getting right with God shouldn't just make us feel better, but also improve our perspective on the world, our understanding of it, and our determination to act in accordance with the Holy Spirit's leadership in the way of love, which includes compassion, justice, and resistance to evil in all its forms.

So, dear friends, this Lent I invite you to begin by considering what you might change in order to keep increasing in hope and healing, love and reconciliation. We can do much more for others, much more effectively, if our own lives are in good order. So today, please take a moment to consider: Is there something weighing you down, holding you back, that it's past time to cast it off? Is there something you can do anew, or differently, that might turn your heart more fully toward the love of God? Lent offers us the opportunity to change, to make a new beginning.

Like the new life that breaks out of seeming death every spring, over the next 40 days, new life will begin within us, if we are open to it. But these 40 precious days offer an opportunity to make changes that will last longer than a season. Lent gives us the chance to live new lives, to make changes that will endure. The season is not so much a gauntlet to be run as a springboard to launch ourselves into the brilliant future God intends for us.

So now is the time to move. Now is the time to change. Now is the time for all of us to remember that we don't move or change alone, but surrounded by a supportive community and all the angels of heaven. Just as the vegetable kingdom's shoots of new life emerge together as one season's event, so too does the Kingdom of God's new life emerge and grow together, as one body in one Spirit. So rely on the support of the body and the Spirit as you seek to dislodge spiritual obstacles, or grow around them. Together we will ensure that not our piety, but God's grace, is revealed as the hope and

the light of the world.