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WHAT'S YOUR SIGN?

What's your sign? No, I don't have an interest in astrology, and it's not a pick-up line.

Seriously, though, what's your sign? What's your sign for today and the next forty days? Is it just a smudge of ashes on your forehead, or is it something that runs a bit deeper?

Today, Ash Wednesday, marks the turning point in the Church calendar between the two great cycles of the Church calendar – a descent from the mountaintops of the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany seasons and down through the long valley and re-ascent of the Lent-Easter-Pentecost cycle. At this turning point, it might be helpful to look at some of the traditions associated with Ash Wednesday and the forty-day season of Lent in order to make what we do here today – and in the weeks to come – more meaningful.

A forty-day season of penitence and reflection before the emotional and spiritual roller-coaster ride of Holy Week is one of the most ancient traditions of the Christian Church. The primary significance of the number forty is that it simply represents a long time in the Bible. In Hebrew Scripture, Noah and his ark floated for forty days before it stopped raining, and the Israelites wandered around in the desert for forty years before entering the Promised Land. The New

Testament tells us that Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness, fasting and praying, before he began his ministry.

A longstanding tradition at the beginning of Lent is the practice of burning Palm branches left over from the previous Palm Sunday and marking the sign of the cross on one's forehead – hence the name Ash Wednesday. A friend of mine, a Disciples of Christ minister, tells me that in his tradition, instead of burning palm branches to make the ashes, he asks each person to write down something that he or she is letting go of, and all the scraps of paper are burned and used for the ashes. Another friend of mine last year burned sage, bridging her Native American and Christian spiritualities. Whether they're palms, paper or herbs, the idea is related to the old Hebrew custom of dressing in sackcloth and ashes as a sign of mourning, contrition for our fallen-ness as human beings and desire for self-purification.

And, yet, even in the midst of the sobering preparations for the passion of Holy Week that Lent represents, this season also represents a time of hope, beginning as it does in depths of winter and carrying us to the doorstep of spring. After all, the name of the season comes from an old English word for “spring,” and Scripture passages like the ones we just heard warn us against looking “dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting.” Passages like the one we heard from Isaiah remind us that God seeks relationship with us, not to condemn us. “Rend your hearts and not your clothing,”

Isaiah writes. “Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”

So how to reconcile those two apparently contrary ideas? In marking our faces with ashes, are we simply acknowledging our humanity in all its imperfection and tendency toward sinfulness? Or are we disfiguring ourselves in self-righteous hypocrisy?

One modern commentator looks at it like this: “The act of receiving ashes must not become the focal point of this day but rather a *sign* of the day, a sign that is part of the penitential beginning of the season of Lent.” In this sense, a sign is an outward reminder that carries us through until we internalize a new way of being – when the change is fully a part of us, we no longer need the actual “sign” as a constant reminder. Sort of like the way my wedding ring, after 18 years, has literally imprinted itself on my flesh. Most days I don’t even consciously notice the metal on my finger. I don’t look at it with surprise as I did in the days immediately after my wedding and suddenly remember that, oh, yes, I *am* married. In fact, I can feel the ring even if I’m not actually wearing it.

What a contrast that idea is from the practice of many people today who will stand impatiently in lines out onto the sidewalk, waiting for their ashes and then rushing off to their appointments as if the ashes were some kind of rubber-stamp, a sign of officially approved holiness rather than internal transformation. I wonder if anyone sitting in this place is impatient to get on with it.

For my own part, I'm drawn back to the two years I spent living in the Dominican Republic in the early 1990s. Each spring, in rural parts of the country, farmers prepare for planting by hacking down the previous year's banana trees and setting carefully controlled fire to the stubble. The ash that results is turned under as fertilizer, nourishing the new crop of banana trees.

Now, I have to say that I never watched one of those "controlled" fires without a certain amount of anxiety. My family comes from Oklahoma, where the wind often comes sweeping down the dry plain carrying with it devastating grass fires that scorch everything in their paths, buildings, animals and people included. So, as nourishing as those fires might be to the Dominican soil, in the back of my mind I always knew that they were potentially very dangerous as well, particularly in a rural backwater of a largely third-world country, where fire-fighting still involves bucket brigades.

The ashes that I wear on my forehead each Ash Wednesday are a sign for me of both of those realities. Year after year, I mark myself with ashes – ashes that are a sign to me of the risk as well as the reward that comes from a relationship with God.

They are a reminder for me that some of the best fertilizer results from burning off the stubble and dead wood of my life. The ashes are a sign of what I put into the soil as I prepare for the growth that I hope will occur in this season of Lent, but they're not the fruit itself. The fruit is what springs up when I truly

repent and begin the kind of fast that God calls for, the kind of fast that is not hunger but nourishment, the kind of fast that makes healing spring up like sprouts in a watered garden.

The ashes that I wear are also a sign to me of what it means to play with the fire. It's not for nothing that one of the most basic fears animals – including humankind – have is of fire. It's also not a coincidence that a traditional symbol for the Holy Spirit – that is, God in action – is fire. One of the stories that we will hear at the end of this Lenten journey will be the disciples' encounter with the newly risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus. In this story, the disciples wonder at how their "hearts burned" within them as they spoke with the Christ. I never hear this story without being reminded that sometimes my fingers – not just my heart – get "burned" when I risk moving close to the Holy.

So, I ask again, what's your sign? If you're sitting here realizing you're one of the impatient ones, maybe you should do what a person I know does to resolve his inner conflict. He goes to church each Ash Wednesday and then finds the nearest bathroom and promptly washes all the evidence off his face. And if you're sitting here realizing that this is a day that can mark the beginning of a season of growth – however risky that may be – then let *that* be a sign to you.