

Ash Wednesday 2025 Reflection Linda E Hunter

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, a 40-day period when we enter into a season of reflection, penance, and transformation. It is a time when we repent of our sins and try to enter into a deeper relationship with God. It's marked by fasting, prayer, and giving, all of which help us to focus our hearts and minds on the renewal that comes through Christ.

Traditionally, we begin this season with the imposition of ashes, a reminder of our mortality, sinfulness, and need for repentance. As we place the ashes on your forehead, we will say, *"Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and remain faithful to Christ."* These words are not meant to bring us into despair but to remind us of our human fragility and the inevitability of death. That, though we are dust, we are also loved by God. And from this very dust, new life can emerge.

Ash Wednesday is not meant to be a morbid or despairing occasion but a moment of grace—a turning towards God, of acknowledging our brokenness and our deep need for renewal. The ashes symbolize more than just death; they point to the new life in Christ that can only emerge from the dust of repentance and transformation. Through this season, we are invited to confront our sin, but also to embrace the hope of redemption that Christ offers.

The passage from John 8:1-11 tells the story of a woman caught in the act of adultery, brought before Jesus by a crowd seeking to condemn her. According to Jewish law, adultery was a grave sin, punishable by stoning. The crowd seek Jesus' judgment and he responds with wisdom. Sayin to them, *"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."* One by one, the accusers drop their stones and leave, until only the woman remains. Jesus, in his compassion, speaks words of grace: *"Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."*

In this encounter, we see a powerful example of Jesus' grace, mercy, and invitation to repentance. He does not ignore the sin or the law but acknowledges the woman's wrongs, while offering her a path to healing and forgiveness. His words *"Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."* are not just a command but an invitation to transformation, to emerge from the ashes of sin and begin a new path in Christ.

This powerful moment of mercy is echoed in the words of *Malcolm Guite's Ash Wednesday* sonnet, which speaks to both our human condition and the hope of redemption. He writes:

*"Receive this cross of ash upon your brow,
Brought from the burning of Palm Sunday's cross.
The forests of the world are burning now
And you make late repentance for the loss."*

Guite's sonnet draws a connection between the ashes we receive today and the burning of Palm Sunday's cross, the symbol of Christ's ultimate sacrifice. It's a stark reminder that repentance is not just for us as individuals but also for the collective brokenness of the world. The forests burning, as Guite writes, symbolize the destruction of God's creation, echoing the environmental damage we face today. In this context, our repentance is not only for personal failures but also for the ways in which we have failed to care for the world entrusted to us. Guite's words remind us that repentance is not just a personal act but a call for collective healing.

His sonnet continues:

*"But Hope could rise from ashes even now,
Beginning with this sign upon your brow."*

This line mirrors Jesus' invitation in John 8. The ashes, like the stones that the crowd dropped one by one, do not have the final say. While the woman's sin was real, it was not the end of her story. Hope rises from the ashes of her guilt, just as hope rises from the ashes of our own lives. The ashes are not a symbol of despair but a beginning—a starting point for grace, renewal, and transformation.

As we enter this Lent, we are invited to confront our sin, to acknowledge our brokenness. Just as the woman in John 8 was given a second chance, so are we. The ashes we receive are a call to leave behind our old selves—our sins, our failures—and to walk in the newness of life that Jesus offers us. It is a call not just to repentance but to the transformation that comes through God's grace.

Let this Lenten season be one of repentance, but also one of hope and renewal. As Guite's sonnet suggests, even in the dust, there is the potential for new life. Like the woman in John 8, may we all hear Jesus' words of grace: *"Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."* May we emerge from the ashes, ready to walk in the freedom and transformation that Christ offers us all. This is an invitation to embark on a journey of renewal, not a journey of self-condemnation or despair but a journey of grace—where we leave behind our old lives and step into the freedom that Christ offers. Through the Lenten discipline of fasting, prayer, and giving, we are invited to experience transformation, just as the woman experienced her own profound moment of grace and change.

As we reflect on the ashes and the mercy of Christ, let us remember that the dust of our lives does not define us; it is the grace of God that transforms us. May we open our hearts to the hope of renewal, trusting that Christ can bring forth life from our ashes and lead us into the newness of his resurrection life.