

**Ash Wednesday – February 21, 2007**  
**Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV**  
**Matthew 6:1-6,16-21 – Treasures on Earth**

***The Rev. Kent Higgins***

Tonight we begin a journey into the wilderness, the place where we go at our peril, and tonight we begin, I hope, a process by which we will – for at least a brief time – take a look at our lives and what we are doing with them.

Wilderness time is not for the faint of heart, for it is a time when we intentionally remove our blinders and try to look honestly at ourselves.

One of the things that honest people have to acknowledge is that “we have left undone those things we ought to have done, and we have done those things we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us.” Those words are from the General Thanksgiving, that is to say, the prayer by which we approach God in humility asking for his grace and favor.

On Ash Wednesday, we go through a ritual acknowledgement of our unworthiness, but I don’t mean to suggest that we should therefore assume an attitude of depression, as if we were the lowliest of the low. First of all, Jesus does not expect that of us. Quite the contrary, he recognizes us as his friends. Secondly, and the prayer continues with these words, “...thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy.”

Because being merciful is a property of God, that is to say because it is normal and natural for God to be merciful, we have hope for tomorrow.

I invite you to a Holy Lent, a time of self-examination and renewal. I know the lives of many of us are busy and complex, but somehow, I hope we will be able

to find just a few minutes each day to contemplate how gracious God has been to us.

In the Gospel for Ash Wednesday, Jesus tells us how we should undertake this discipline.

We should give money for the care of those poorer than we, and we should do it quietly, without drawing attention to ourselves or our gifts.

We should pray, and that is part of that quiet time when we simply listen for what God is saying to us, words that may normally be drowned out by the noise that surrounds us in our daily lives.

We should fast, but not so that anyone is aware of it. “What are you giving up for Lent?” is a routine question, but I suggest that after Lent is over is quite soon enough to talk about what our Lenten disciplines were.

We have a simple and a clear choice. We can set our sights on the temporal benefits with which mankind rewards itself – treasures on earth – or we can focus on the important things where our reward comes from God in heaven.

Remembering the words of the collect we prayed earlier, we know that God doesn't hate any of his creation, in fact he loves all of us who are within that creation, not because we have done something to make ourselves worthy to receive his blessings, but because he wants us to know “the peace that passes all understanding.”

I'd like to leave an image in your minds based on the words from one of our hymns, with which I'm sure you are familiar, "Praise my soul the king of heaven."<sup>1</sup>

The second stanza begins "Praise him for his grace and favor to his people in distress." I don't know how many of you are familiar with the English concept of a "grace and favor house." It is a dwelling that the lord of the manor gives, rent free, to someone whom he particularly likes. And that person is free to live in the house for so long as that status endures. All that is required of the tenant is the payment of one rose, one single flower, to the lord of the manor each year. That "rose rent" is an acknowledgement of the grace – the freely given gift of the lord – to the person who has received the use of the house.

Think of all the God has given us, starting with life itself, and contemplate during these forty days, when and how we will deliver our alms, prayers, and sacrifices in return for those gifts.

Lent is a wonderful opportunity. It need not be a burden. In fact, it can be an enormous joy as we refocus ourselves in right relationship to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Hymn 410, *The Hymnal 1982*, Church Publishing Company, words by Henry Francis Lyte.