

Ash Wednesday, Year C  
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
March 2, 2022  
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17  
Psalm 103  
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

## **Marie Kondo Meets Smokey Bear, or The Controlled Burn of Lent**

Every Ash Wednesday we have that gospel. It always strikes as a bit ironic that we hear a gospel about not displaying our piety before others before we get ashes smeared on our foreheads and walk around with them for the rest of the day. I'm sure there's a sermon in there about that, but we'll turn our attention to other things.

Until about 800 years ago, our Christian forebears observed the season of Lent as a form of a community retreat. They were interested to examine together what had become out of alignment for the congregation, the community since the last time around, since the same time the previous year. What and whom needed to be restored? What needed to be let go of? What needed to be taken up?

At St Paul's we are following that pattern this year as we move through this season together as a season of corporate discernment. What do we, the community of St Paul's, need to let go? What do we need to take up?

I don't know about you, but it seems to me that it's pretty easy to make Lent not only a time of introspection and discernment but also one of dreariness and drudgery, to make it not only self-examining but also self-loathing. And, on the other hand, it's pretty easy to blow the whole thing off and just kinda hang out till Easter, raising the question, do we really need Lent?

I mean, what is it really about anyway, Lent? The word *Lent* comes from an old English word *lencthen*, as in "the days are getting longer." It was a synonym for spring. Some other locations in the northern hemisphere a little farther north than where we find ourselves here at the end of the road can more dramatically experience this lengthening of days, but even here, we get a sense of that. The days are getting longer as we move toward spring. But what else is Lent about, besides a lengthening of daylight?

A clue for me is in the ashes of Ash Wednesday. Ashes are among the most

nutritious substances in which plants can flourish. So that mark on our foreheads is not only a means by which we confess mortality, express humility, and mark the beginning of holy Lent. That ashy mark is also a sign indicating we will undertake some serious work, that we will enter into a period of self-examination and discernment, yes, and into a seasonal controlled burn.

Do you know what I mean? A controlled burn, a wildfire intentionally set in order to renew the life of a forest by clearing out undergrowth, restoring ecosystem health, recycling nutrients, and preparing an area for new growth. Controlled burns provide ashes for new growth. Controlled burns are undertaken to reduce the likelihood of unintentional wildfires, the ones that burn uncontrollably, devastatingly, as we have seen in the western US over the last several years in particular. These unintentional wildfires find most of their fuel in the undergrowth allowed to remain too long.

This is part of what we mean when we speak of Lenten discipline or disciplines. We must be alert, present in and to this time. We must exert oversight and take responsibility for our own lives. What do we need to burn away, offer up, let go?

What if we took on Lent in this way, as a seasonal controlled burn that could really clear out the unnecessary clutter, the spiritual, mental, relational, emotional, temporal, material clutter of our lives, all the stuff that separates us from God and one another and from our own selves?

We've made a good start here at St Paul's by clearing out attics, boats, and closets for last weekend's tremendously successful ABC Sale benefitting Good Samaritan Episcopal Church and School in Bondeau, Haiti. That's a good start. What other clutter is there in our common life and in our lives individually?

The ashes of Ash Wednesday are a call to new beginnings and fresh growth. Out of ashes. Joy and exhilaration from better alignment between what is really important and how we spend our days. Relief from identifying what is ours to do and from letting go all that no longer serves. Rejuvenation from discerning afresh and anew the work to which we are called in this particular season not only of the liturgical year but also in this particular season of our life together.

So, you can think of this sermon as Marie Kondo meets Smokey Bear: declutter and control a burn of what is not needed.

I don't know about for you, but for me, not just every Lent but nearly every day I

need a controlled burn of discernment to clear out all the stuff—including all the good but unnecessary stuff—that claims my time and clamors for my attention. So, for me, when I begin Lent with ashes on my forehead, I have put a sign up for all the world to see, not so much of my piety but as an indicator that I am serious about alignment and decluttering. And I have put up a sign that I'm willing to use fire, to allow the fire of the Holy Spirit to burn up the unnecessary to produce the ashes from which new growth will come.

I invite you, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, to a seasonal controlled burn in which you clear out all that no longer serves, spend time asking God what you are called to take up, and align yourself afresh and anew with God's call to you in this season of life.