

John came preaching in the wilderness. This was one hundred percent intentional. He was outside, near the Jordan River. Any Israelite would connect the dots from John's surroundings to their ancestors in the Old Testament. After the exodus from Egypt, Moses led his people, out into the wilderness toward the promised land. But on the way, they began to complain, to question God's decisions, to trust themselves more. And so, they were kept from entering the land He had for them and instead were made to wander forty years. Eventually God did lead them into the land of promise—a wonderful thing, except, over and over again this pattern would play out: the people would turn away from God, suffer consequences, and then turn back to Him in repentance.

And so, John's location underscored the message he was preaching that day. God's people, after thousands of years, had once again largely dismissed their God and were spiritually wandering and John was calling them back. His message was straightforward: Repent and return to a relationship with God. He emphasized this message by offering baptism in the Jordan – the same river their ancestors crossed as they entered the land God had given to them.

And this is the point at which Jesus steps on the scene. From Galilee he arrives in the wilderness. He leaves “civilization” to be with those who have received John's call.

John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

When Jesus shows up and meets John, he connects the message of John's repentance to himself. He receives John's baptism; a baptism meant for sinners because he will be the sin-bearer. He will carry our sins and receive God's judgment. And through his death and resurrection he will create a new baptism, one that pulsates with the power of the very name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Today is Ash Wednesday and if you listen closely, you can hear John's words echoing throughout the holy Christian church. He is calling us to repent; to turn back to God. As we wander through the desert, he's calling for us to return to the waters of our own baptism, the baptism created by Jesus and applied to us by God himself.

As you enter this season of Lent, John challenges you to assess the focus of your life; to examine your priorities; to consider what idols may have found their way to the throne of your heart. Where have you begun to wander? Where have you turned from Jesus in favor of some worldly treasure? Over the next 40 days, I urge you to spend some quiet time in self-reflection. Pray that the Holy Spirit would inspire you to be radically honest with yourself. And yet Lent is not simply about admitting guilt and confessing sin and feeling bad about it; it is also about what

comes next: which is to say, a return to the Lord. A humble walk back into the presence of the one you believe is going to meet you with an embrace.

Ash Wednesday is also a day when you are invited to be marked with ashes, which symbolizes three things: sinfulness, mortality, and redemption. It is true: we are sinful, fallen creatures that have turned from God in all our ways. Paul writes in his letter to the Roman church:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

Our sinfulness leads to death; in the same letter, Paul famously writes, “The wages of sin is death...” and the putting on of ashes is meant as a tangible remembrance of this fact. “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” There is a factual basis to Ash Wednesday that we cannot escape. Death is real. Why is there death? The Bible tells us. Death is real because sin is real. And as hard as we try, we keep sinning. It is a problem we cannot solve. But thanks be to God, there is One who did. He was without sin, but he carried ours for us. He was crucified – for you. He conquered death through his resurrection – for you. And in doing so, he has removed the ashes of our sinful past and created in us new life – a life that in him does meet the demands of God. You are washed by the blood of Jesus. And baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, washes away the sign of death forever. Plunged into baptismal water with Jesus, what is true of Him is true of you. Which means that God is always saying to you, “You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.”