

SKIN AND BONES

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Psalm 102:1-22, 23-28

On Wednesday night of this week, we held our Ash Wednesday service here at the church. This service culminates with the ritual known as the Imposition of Ashes in which a mixture of ashes and oil is used to inscribe the shape of a cross on each person's forehead. Following the service, some people will immediately wipe the ashes off their skin. That is perfectly okay. I, on the other hand, usually forget about the ashes until I get home and pass a mirror.

On Wednesday, following the service, I was back in my office at my desk getting things together when a young man on our cleaning crew came in to empty the trash. I see him once or twice a week and we always chat for a moment. But this time, he walked in, looked at me, and said, "Nice tattoo." I didn't know what he was talking about and I looked at him and asked, "What tattoo?" And he pointed at his forehead and then it mine, and it hit me that he was referring to the cross on my face. I had forgotten about it. I laughed and explained that we had just held our Ash Wednesday service, and he left. About five minutes later, he sticks his head back into my office and confesses that he didn't know what the cross meant so he went and asked his mother and she explained it to him. (Our cleaning crew is a family business.) The young man had come back to apologize to me. He said he didn't mean to be disrespectful. I tried to assure him that I was not offended in any way and he had not done anything wrong.

But that got me to thinking. Maybe the Ash Wednesday cross should be a tattoo—an emblem inked permanently on our forehead.

The cross of ashes is an ancient ritual marking the start of the season of Lent—our forty-day journey leading us toward Easter. Lent is a time of penance to prepare the faithful for the celebration of Christ's resurrection and his triumph over death. Ashes symbolize death. Something that has burned has died. It has lost its form. It has ceased to exist. Throughout the Bible, ashes are symbols of grief. Job famously sits in ashes as a sign of his grieving before God.

The cross of ashes that we impose on Ash Wednesday are meant to represent our sins and our mortality. The cross of ashes is a visible confession that we are sinners as well as a reminder that in time we shall die. We receive this mark at the start of Lent to signify our Easter destination—a journey from ash to resurrection. We smudge our faces with the dirt and grime of ashes and pray that by the end of the journey we shall be made clean. As we read in Psalm 51, after confessing their sins, the psalmist pleads to God, *Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow*. We want to clean the sins out of our hearts, but that is only something God can do.

So, instead of a temporary cross of ash, why not just get a tattoo—a permanent reminder of our sin and mortality. It would be there when we look in the mirror; it would be a sign to the world of the journey that we've embarked upon.

As part of our Lenten journey this year, I will be preaching a series of sermons on a set of psalms that are categorized as *Psalms of Lament*. Psalms of Lament are numerous and found not just in the psalter but throughout the Bible. There are psalms of individual lament, national lament, psalms of illness, psalms of those who are tormented. We will look at a few of these.

A Psalm of Lament is a song or poem in which the psalmist cries out to God for deliverance. It is a cry for God's attention and an appeal to God's compassion to intervene in a desperate situation. These cries to God do not come from whiners or perpetual complainers. They come from people who are in desperate situations who believe God can lift them up. At their root, the Psalms of Lament are expressions of praise—confidence in God's power and willingness to intercede in our lives. A Psalm of Lament doesn't just cry out “my life is in shambles” and leave it at that. No. These psalms always end with the belief that the person's cry will be acknowledged by their Lord.

Today, I invite you to join with me looking at Psalm 102. This psalm is an individual lament. It is rather general in nature and describes a person suffering from an unspecified illness. But it is powerful.

Psalm 102 begins with a plea to God for help:

Hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry come to you.

Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress.

Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call.

The psalmist asks God to hear them and not hide from them.

After this cry to be heard, the psalmist offers their lament of the physical and emotional distress they are enduring. The language we find here is descriptive and poetic. The psalmist feels that they are at the edge of death—that their life is *drifting away like smoke*, and their bones *burn like a furnace*. This burning suggests a fever. And because of the fever, their heart withers like grass. If, indeed, their body is wracked with a fever than their would feel like grass withering under the hot sun. The psalmist is grass and they are too wilted to even eat. They are nothing but skin and bones.

They are also like an owl. While our viewpoint of owls is positive, Jews of that day viewed owls as being unclean animals. It is a cry of further distress to say *I am like an owl of the wilderness, like a little owl of the wastelands*. The psalmist sees themselves as an unclean creature existing beyond the margins of society.

In addition to their physical suffering, this person feels the abuse directed at them from other people, probably about their illness. *All day long my enemies taunt me, they use my name for a curse.*

Because of their suffering, the psalmist writes that they *eat ash like bread*. *Their tears mingle with their drink*. They feel that God has discarded them and that their days are coming to an end. *My days are like an evening shadow*. While that sounds nice, just think about a shadow in the evening. Shadows need light. At the end of the day, when the sun sets, shadows disappear. The psalmist feels that because of their illness, their life is an evening shadow, stretching out thinner and thinner, about to be consumed by the darkness.

The next section of this Psalm comes in verses 12 through 22 and offers an abrupt change in tone. In this section we read uplifting praises to God. I believe that the purpose of this part of the psalm is to place the poet's lament into context. We are shown how low the psalmist feels compared now to God's grandeur.

Verse 23 brings us back to lament with the accusation that God *has shortened my days*.

Psalms of Lament don't end there. As I said earlier, they contain ascriptions of praise to God, recognition of God's mercy and power.

In this psalm, the psalmist concludes with a confession of God's role in the universe—that God laid the foundation of the earth. The heavens are the work of God's hands. The heavens and earth will eventually perish, but God will always endure. Creation, he says, is like clothing that wears out, but God never changes.

The Psalm concludes with the acknowledgement that God's children—God's people—will always live securely, and their children shall as well.

Psalm 102 focuses on the despair of just one individual but in the end recognizes that God does watch over all creation. One person may die, but the people are secure.

A psalm like this would have been part of the worship liturgy. It would have provided the sick and the suffering with a voice. *Hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry come to you*.

Lastly, after giving it more thought, I've decided that theologically, having a permanent tattoo on your forehead—even a tattoo of a cross—is not such a great idea. The purpose of Lent is to take us on a journey of change. We enter as sinners and we exit with the joy of the resurrection. We may be sinners from birth to death, we may suffer from illness or injury, we may have wasted to skin and bones, but we are also assured that God is with us, God hears our cries, God watches over this creation. One day we shall inhabit God's kingdom. And on that day, we won't need any mark of our sin and mortality. We shall be washed clean.

Amen.