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Horizons
Spirituality



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by Colleen Gibson

Columnist

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Wednesday morning was not a good day for parking at our local church. Even though the sister I live with and I had left early, there was not a space to be found when we arrived for the morning Mass. Pulling in behind the parish school, we finally found a spot a few minutes after the service had started.

"Ash Wednesday," we sighed in unison.

By the time we found a seat, the lector was into the second reading from the second letter to the Corinthians. Paul's familiar words washed over us: "We appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For God says: *In an acceptable time I heard you, and on the day of salvation I helped you.* Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:1-2).

After a quick homily and invitation to consider the call of the Lenten season, we lined up to receive our ashes. Reminded that the dust we bore on our brows was a sign of our beginning and our end, I looked around at the church filled with fresh-pressed crosses, each one as unique as the individuals who bore them.

And then, just as quickly as Communion was received, those dusty brows headed out into the world, leaving an empty parking lot to be filled with eager hearts and clean heads within the hour.

"Where did all those people go?" the sister I had been with asked later in the day. "I went to the store and nothing… not a cross in sight!" We both marveled at this.

The question, innocent enough, stayed with me.

Later, driving through a neighborhood in Philadelphia plagued by the opioid epidemic, I marveled at the people walking by in drug-induced stupors. With the exception of my forehead, there were no ashes in sight and yet there were people bearing crosses all around.

Stopping to visit a center where our sisters minister to immigrants in the neighborhood, I found a priest giving out ashes to the students and teachers inside. "Where will all these people go?" I thought to myself.

This neighborhood was where I began my journey in religious life. It left an indelible mark on me. Here I encountered Christ in the neighbors I worked with and the life we shared. The mark of faith it (and they) left on me was a call to believe in the Good News and to witness to the life, love, and hope found in and among the dirt and dust.

As I left the center, the priest stepped out onto the street behind me. Every few steps, someone would stop him to ask him for ashes. As I got into my car, the refrain of "repent and believe in the Good News" rang in my ears.

That is the good news of Lent, each step is another opportunity to be marked by the cross, to receive the grace of God not in vain but in the glory of the moment.

Beyond the ashes, there is something gritty about these Lenten days. These days offer us the chance to feel differently. In fasting, we recognize our limits and our needs, both of which we can so often overlook. In so doing, we also recognize the reality and the needs of so many of our neighbors who regularly go without.

These 40 days also give us the opportunity to remember who we are. While the cross we receive on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday makes us mindful of who we are and who we claim to be for a day, the intentionality of the entire Lenten season calls us to be mindful of who we are even when the ashes wash off. We are reminded of who we are called to be and we recall who we have been and who we, in the process of living, have become. Our lives are to be the sign of our faith and witness to the transformation, renewal, and repentance Lent calls for.

"Behold, now is a very acceptable time;" Paul declares to the Corinthians, "behold, now is the day of salvation." Those words we first heard on Ash Wednesday reverberate throughout Lent. Now is an acceptable time; now is the moment you and God have been waiting for.

So, what would it mean if we lived each moment of this Lenten season in that manner: beholding the perfection of *this* moment?

What would it mean for us if we declared in our hearts the supreme acceptability of each and every moment to encounter God, to meet love, to offer mercy, to heal and be healed? And what would it mean for the world around us, if in our words and actions we chose to accept the invitation each moment has to offer? If we saw today as the acceptable time to be who (and how) God calls us to be?

The choice is ours. We can choose to see the crosses others bear. We can choose to believe in the good news. We can choose to reflect light in the darkness and to have the courage to speak truth to power. We can choose to let the defining marks of our life be kindness and compassion. We can and we must.

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These choices are the grit that mark our lives; they are the signs that we have heard God's invitation and are responding. Our lives then become the marks Christ leaves in the world, the crosses drawn with each step on the journey and each act of love and mercy. Believing the good news and putting it into action requires getting our hands dirty, it calls our attention to the dust beneath our fingernails, and it allows us to help and be helped on this day of our salvation.

"Behold," I said to myself looking in the mirror Wednesday night as I wiped the ashes from my forehead. "Behold, you have been marked by more than just ashes."

[A Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, Colleen Gibson is the author of the blog Wandering in Wonder and has been published work in various periodicals including America, Commonweal and Give Us This Day. She currently serves as coordinator of services at the SSJ Neighborhood Center in Camden, New Jersey.]