

Mardi Gras is tomorrow, and the season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and the imposition of ashes. My church when I was growing up didn't have an Ash Wednesday service, or if they did my family didn't attend, but I had friends who went every year, often before school. I still remember them going through the day with that smudge on their faces. I didn't understand why they did, but somehow I respected them for bearing their faith so publicly.

As an adult, I began to participate in Ash Wednesday services and observe Lent, and I admit that this is one of the most meaningful times of the year for me. As the United Methodist Book of Worship says, "Ash Wednesday emphasizes a dual encounter: we confront our own mortality and confess our sin before God within the community of faith." The ashes are the sign of that encounter. They are also a reminder that those sins we confess are burned up by God, separated from us as far as east is from west, when we repent. Psalm 51, which is usually read on Ash Wednesday, cries out, "Create in me a clean heart, O God!" And God will.

The following story illustrates this better than any I've seen and I share it with you:

Barbara Sherer is an Army Chaplain. She was preparing for an Ash Wednesday service in Kuwait. A complex of several dining tents in the camp had caught on fire, but all the soldiers inside escaped without serious injury. She had the idea to use the ashes from the fire for the upcoming service, so she obtained permission from the MPs guarding the site to retrieve some ashes.

She says, "Two days later I decided to open the bag and see if I needed to crunch up the ashes into smaller pieces. I was digging around in the cup with a plastic knife when I noticed the edge of something metallic. I reached in, and pulled out a cross. A flat, metal cross. It had some dark smudges on it from the fire, but it was otherwise undamaged. I could still read the etching on it: 'Jesus is Lord.'

"I can't even fathom the odds of picking the exact site of that cross out of the acreage destroyed by the fire. It doesn't matter. The message to me is clear: God walks with us through the terrible firestorms of our lives, and we are lifted unharmed out of the ashes. We may be marked in some way, like the cross of ash placed on our foreheads during Ash Wednesday. However, that mark is a symbol of God's love and protection.

"I wear that cross now on my dogtags. No matter where the Army may send me, or what God may ask of me, I will cherish this special reminder that God will never leave us alone to face the tragedies in our lives. With God's help, we will always rise out of the ashes."

I invite you to join me in remembering our mortality and sinfulness before God, and cherishing the promise of God that we will never be alone to face them. With God's help we are rising from the ashes.