

32963 Faith Column for 2-14-13  
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### *Thinking it Over*

The Christian world is entering the season of Lent, which for a lot of people has some not so positive connotations. It all begins with Ash Wednesday, which starts the forty day period of repentance that precedes Easter. The practice of placing ashes on the foreheads of sinners on Ash Wednesday originated during the Middle Ages, with the notion that a little public humiliation can go a long way toward inducing repentance. Eventually monks who sympathized with those undergoing this very public proclamation of their sinfulness began to voluntarily wear ashes as well. And so the custom spread, until the mark of ashes was placed on the foreheads of all Christian worshippers on Ash Wednesday. The ashes were intended to be a signal of repentance, a sign of humility, and a reminder of human mortality: from dust you have come, O mortal, and to dust you shall return.

We've enjoyed some good-natured ribbing from members of other faith traditions who claim that while having some time set aside for self-appraisal and repentance makes sense, forty days is overdoing it. The Christian season of Lent hardly conveys a very upbeat view of humanity, they say.

Maybe they have a point. Is forty days of repentance too many? Would one or two or ten days be enough? Just how sinful are we and how much repentance ought to be expected of us, do you think? Oh yes, it varies from person to person. You could probably name a few people who don't seem to need more than a minute of repentance and a few for whom forty years wouldn't suffice. But actually, that is precisely why we've come to believe that Lent is useful for us all. It more or less demands we Christians answer the need-for-repentance question for ourselves. Just how do you see yourself? How bad – or good – are you?

Biblical commentary about how we human beings ought to see ourselves is very interesting. While the book of Genesis reminds us that we are no more than dust (a pretty negative perspective, perhaps), the Psalmist claims that we were formed to be just a little lower than God (which is a very positive perspective, indeed.) So according to scripture, we are paradoxically both common and extraordinary, both trivial and grand, both insignificant and important, both earth-anchored and heaven-bound.

Maybe maintaining a clear perspective about that dual nature of ours is a pretty healthy idea, actually. Because if Ash Wednesday and Lent seem contrived to remind us, painfully, of our lower nature, well, that just could be the balance we need as we look toward the wonder of Easter. After all, at Easter we make an astonishing claim about our supreme importance. We will claim that God has entered our world, suffering its worst out of an unquenchable and undying love for us, which makes us simply priceless.

So which are we: sinful, small, frail, and flawed – or polished, restored, redeemed, and whole? Maybe we're both. Let's spend the forty days of Lent thinking it over.