

Matt's Message for Ash Wednesday:
"GO! You can't stay here! Hit the road! GO!"



What a winter! Ice, slush, freezing rain, frozen mud, ice, cold rain, fog... minus 20 one day, then plus 5 the next. It's been so up-and-down, forming so much ice on the ground, that it's been hard just walking around. I work with a volunteer firefighter. He said that on those days when it freezes after a thaw, they have non-stop calls from people falling and injuring themselves on the ice. This has been a winter of freezing rain and cold rain and in-between temperatures.

A lot of us – myself included – love the season of winter: snow-shoeing, snowmobiling, ice-fishing, pond-hockey, skiing, snow-boarding, hikes through winter wonderlands, fresh, cold air to breathe in, and cold, bright, starry nights. But this winter has had very little of all that good stuff. I've been out on the Omemee pond for some skating and snowshoeing, but not very much. For my job, I'm outside 100% of the time, and I can't remember a winter when it's been harder to stay warm. In minus 20 or even minus 30, you can bundle up and cover your face and work outside while staying pretty comfortable if you know how to do it. But when it's zero and it's a cold, cold rain all day (with lots of mud and ice to walk on and get your forklift stuck in), it's very hard to enjoy the winter.

And as we approach Ash Wednesday, which is the day on the Church calendar that begins our journey through Lent towards the celebration of Easter, we're only halfway through February. There could be lots of ice and frozen mud and freezing rain in store for us over the next couple of months – sorry to say!



But Ash Wednesday brings help and hope. Ash Wednesday is the beginning of a journey. On Ash Wednesday, we may be in the middle of a freezing rain “weather event”, we may be buried under two feet of hard, frozen snow, but Ash Wednesday tells us that... *we are going somewhere different from where we are*. We are on a journey. Where we are now is not where we will always be. We are moving forward. We are hitting the road. If we choose to.



Physically, we are beginning our journey towards the spring and – in the symbolic, liturgical life of the Church – we are spiritually re-beginning our journey towards Christ and Easter and eternal life. It’s funny how it’s a journey that has to be re-started every year, but I think this is a very wise idea.

In one sense, we have arrived already: we live in the eternal light of the love of Christ. But in another sense, we haven’t really gotten anywhere yet: we are sinful, imperfect, sometimes ridiculous, and we have a long, long way to go. This is the great Christian concept of “*already/not yet*.” We are *already* there, but we are also *not yet* there. For people who like to think exactly and precisely and scientifically, this kind of thing can be very annoying. But there simply is and always will be much that is deeply mysterious about human life, so I love this old idea that we have arrived and we still have a long, long way to go. There’s a long road ahead.



And what is it that speeds us on our way? It is one of the most important Christian ideas: repentance. Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent which is all about Repentance. On Ash Wednesday, we kneel down and the priest puts ashes on our foreheads for two reasons: to remind us of 1) our mortality and 2) our sinfulness, ie, our need to change our ways to become better people. Lent is when we reflect on our own lives and come to understand how we have to change and grow. But it's also a good time to reflect on the history of the Church and how the Church must change and grow.

I have no idea how you personally have to grow (but I'm sure it should happen in some way...), but I know that the Church has a lot of growing to do. Central to Jesus's message was his teaching that religious people shouldn't think of themselves as special or inherently exalted over other people. This is an attitude which (to put it mildly) the Church has struggled with over the centuries and still does today. Many Christians see our Christian identity as a huge, walled castle, in which we can be 100% safe and from which we can fire our arrows at the world. But Christ's idea of the Church is a group of devoted people moving through the world in the power of His Spirit. Jesus's most consistent enemies were the Pharisees who wanted the world divided into US and THEM. Jesus flipped the religious world on its head by spending his time with THEM and abandoning US. He resolutely went with the outsiders and firmly turned away from the religious insiders.

What does this mean for us in our personal lives? That's something I really don't know. Maybe that's the personal growth we need: figuring out what *outsiders* we've ignored and what *insiders* we have sought to please too much. These Matt's Messages are not sermons meant to bring you all the way to your destination, but merely reflections to offer some images and ideas to inspire you along the road.



All I know is that it is a perfect time to start a journey. It's a perfect time to move forward. We have to go. Now. There's no standing still. Sometimes we wish we could live life like a king or queen in our own big, walled castle, safe from everything and everyone. That's the North American-dream vision of how life should be: secure, powerful, isolated, better than others.

But the Christian life is quite different and can be summed up in one image: the Pilgrim. We are on the road through the world. We find lodgings where-ever we can, along the way, having faith that God will take care of us tomorrow. We can't be certain what the future holds. We may not even be sure where our next meal will come from. The Pilgrim always moves forward. "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have their nests, but the Son of Man has no-where to lay his head." (Luke 9:25) Jesus stayed in no place for very long, but was always moving onward, journeying through the world.

For us the journey is repentance: personal and communal. Repentance is the only way to move on from where we are. Our sin is holding us back, dragging us down, persuading us to stay where we are forever. If we are to grow and become free, we have to take up the pilgrim's staff and cloak and sandals, and hit the road. We will have to change in some way. We will have to come to new realizations and leave old ways behind.



A winter of freezing rain, slush, frozen mud, and big, cold puddles is a perfect time to re-start our journey, to look forward in hope to a different time, to seek new heights of understanding, and to turn away from old destructive habits.

There's nothing more positive and life-affirming than repentance: it urges us away from smug, self-satisfaction. Lent is the season to repent, to change direction, to start a new journey, to give something up, to take a risk, to surprise people who have known you a long time, and to pray more.

We have already arrived at our destination.

But we still have a long, long way to go.

Ash Wednesday is when we start to go.

Go!

You can't stay here!

Hit the road!

GO!

