

## **Ashes: A reminder and a promise**

Why do we have ashes on Ash Wednesday? I mean ... ashes usually signify death and destruction ... from volcanoes, to forest and home fires, and even to our use of the word in English idiom.

Someone who is fired from their job might say, “All I have left are the ashes of my career.” Another might say the same thing about a failed college experience. “I had high hopes as I graduated from high school, but now everything has turned to ashes.”

But we may be overlooking something here. A field that has been burned to the ground will often produce the best crops ever as the fire which left it in ashes also destroyed the pests and diseases which may have been plaguing it for years while the ashes themselves fertilized the new growth.

Likewise, that job termination might just be the spark that leads to a completely new ... and rewarding ... career. And that failed college experience could very well be the turning point for a completely new ... and profitable ... direction, too.

In the Hebrew Scriptures ... the Old Testament ... ashes were a sign of a person's repentance ... asking God for forgiveness from sins.

When we mark ourselves with ashes on our foreheads, we remind ourselves that we, too, have sinned and are in need of God's mercy ... that our sins led to the necessity for Christ's death on the cross.

This external sign of repentance should reflect an internal recognition that we are sinners who have not followed the Lord's teachings as we should.

But ... as the Gospel decrees ... we should not look grim. After all, the most beautiful of legendary birds ... the phoenix ... is said to spring up anew from its own ashes.

The ashes we have placed on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday are fleeting reminders of our own mortality and the rebirth that is ours through our faith in Jesus Christ.

As our Lenten Journey leads us to the promise of the Earthly springtime to come, so do the ashes on our foreheads give us a glimpse of the divine springtime and resurrection promised by Christ when we are called forth to join our Savior in His Heavenly Kingdom.