

Ash Wednesday  
March 1, 2006  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Ring around the rosie,  
Pockets full of posies,  
Ashes, ashes,  
We all fall down!

It's in our standard repertoire of little kid games, along with "A Tisket, A Tasket" and "London Bridge Is Falling Down." Even in this computer age, when mothers of 3 year olds get them to behave in the doctor's waiting room by putting head phones on them so they can watch movies on personal DVD players sitting in their laps, even in this era of cybertoy, is there a preschooler around who doesn't know how to play "Ring Around the Rosie"? It's a staple of childhood, a catchy little rhyme to sing while happily holding hands, dancing in a circle and crashing to the ground ☺.

It's deadly, of course. Not deadly as in, "fatal to play," but deadly as in referring to death. There's more than meets the eye to those English nursery rhymes, you know. "Ring Around the Rosie" acts out the plague, the Black Death that repeatedly swept through Europe in the Middle Ages, resulting in millions of deaths. The words "ring around the rosie" refer to the rash that appeared on those afflicted by the plague. "Pockets full of posies," a stash of herbs tucked into one's clothing, was how people hoped to ward off the dread disease. "Ashes, ashes, we all fall down," is a stark description of the fate of the majority of sorry folk who contracted the plague. They died, their bodies were trundled away on a cart and burned.

Such an unceremonious procession of death took place outside the window of hymn writer Philip Nicolai, who wrote one of the most beautiful and beloved Advent hymns of all: "Wachet auf," "Wake, awake, for night is flying...." Confronted by death rumbling past his front door, Nicolai inexplicably made music....

Many of you saw the movie *Schindler's List*. There is a scene in which Schindler and his lady friend are horseback riding on a hill overlooking a Polish city. They halt, because even from a distance

they can hear gunfire and see Jews scurrying as they are rounded up for transport to “work camps.” The scene is shot in black and white except for the red coat of a small child darting to and fro in the chaos. Schindler and the woman are alarmed by the events unfolding below them, and then puzzled by what looks like snow sifting down on their shoulders, powdering the horses and the ground. It is neither cold nor wet. It is ash blown by the wind from the smokestack of a nearby crematory.... “Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.”

Last weekend I was in Minnesota, visiting a kind woman whose sad task it is to serve as executor of a loved one’s estate. In the midst of her grief over the friend’s sudden death, she is shouldering the responsibility of sorting through and dispersing a lifetime’s worth of belongings, dealing with banks and lawyers, and selling a house. It seemed over the weekend that the house was on the verge of selling. The realtor dropped by so that my friend could sign a disclaimer that the state requires. It’s a matter of truth-in-advertising; the document acknowledges that the former residents of the house are sprinkled in the back yard. That lush garden, which they lovingly created over decades from a blank, dirt-covered lot, was their little corner of Paradise. In life, they made it known that the garden was where they wanted to rest in death. They left instructions that their cremains should remain in the miniature park they had created. “Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.”

Not everybody’s “into” cremation, but the church is sure “into” ashes. Here we are. Look at my forehead, your neighbor’s forehead, your own if you have a mirror, and see Christianity’s penchant for ashes. For thousands of years Christians **and** the Jewish people who were our ancestors, sprinkled ashes on themselves as an alternative to dancing in a circle and singing, “Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.” In the old days, we would have needed more than the 1 oz. bag of ashes we purchased this year to perform the necessary ritual of repentance for sins that lead to death. We would have needed at least a 5 pound bag of ashes just for the 34 people who gathered at 7 this morning, if we lived in the old days when ashes were dumped wholesale over one’s head instead of being neatly traced in a cross shape on the forehead.

St. Paul puts it most starkly: "...[T]he wages of sin is death" (Romans 6.23a). Genesis says quite literally that because Adam and Eve **sinned** they were condemned to **die**. Because we follow in their footsteps, death is in our future, too. That's the bad news. "Ashes, ashes, we all fall down."

...[T]he wages of sin is death, **but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.** (Romans 6.23)

**That's** the Good News. That's how we can bear the bad news. That's how we can wear this cross of death. We know it is also the cross of life. Jesus Christ died so that we may live. Physical death is still in our future. But it is not our final destiny.

Even looking at carts piled high with corpses about to become ashes, Philip Nicolai professed his faith in the Faithful One:

Zion hears the watchmen singing,  
 And in her heart new joy is springing.  
 She wakes, she rises from her gloom,  
 For her Lord comes down all glorious,  
 The strong in grace, in truth victorious.  
 Her star is ris'n; her light is come.  
 Oh, come, you Blessed One,  
 Lord Jesus, God's own Son.  
 Sing hosanna!  
 We go until the halls we view  
 Where you have bid us dine with you.

Let us dine at the Lord's table tonight, rejoicing in this foretaste of the feast to come, savoring the meal that brings life, forgiveness and salvation, feasting on the food and drink that preserves us unto life everlasting, cherishing the promise that beyond dust glory awaits us. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Olson