

Sense and Sensibility

A Lenten Exploration

SAM PORTARO



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CONTENTS

Introduction | 1

Ash Wednesday and the Days Following | 5

Lent 1: Touch | 17

Lent 2: Sight | 35

Lent 3: Smell | 55

Lent 4: Sound | 75

Lent 5: Taste | 93

Holy Week | 111

ASH WEDNESDAY

When the sign of the cross is made in transparent oil on the forehead of the newly baptized, the recipient is thereby “marked as Christ’s own forever.” On Ash Wednesday, the first day of the season of Lent, the previously invisible signet is retraced in visible charcoal. Gritty ash is pressed into the pores of one’s brow. The earlier affirmation is replaced with a sharp admonition:

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

This reminder of one’s mortality can cast life in deep shadow, and for some this is the primary shade of Lent. Disciplines of self-denial are customary, occasionally relieved by periods of intentional self-giving, like volunteer service to those in need or similar works of kindness and mercy.

The rite impresses our mortality upon us. It literally rubs it in with that cruciform signature traced in ash on human skin.

Skin. It's the largest organ of the human body. And today—Ash Wednesday—it's touched and marked again as Christ's own forever.

So we begin Lent with this powerful reminder of our embodied life. The abrasive texture of the ash, the grinding action of this marking are like sandpaper drawn across the tender skin of the face and we're reminded that we're incarnations of the crucified and risen Christ. We have bodies, we *are* bodies. We're bodies endowed with senses.

Lent, then, isn't a time to deny the mortal body. Rather, Lent may be just the season to remember that we're mortal as dust and ash, and yet as such, we're graced in that mortality. Our very perishability only enhances our preciousness.

Thus, in this Lent we propose to explore more intently our embodied selves and the incarnate world we inhabit, that as we make our way through these forty days we come once again to our senses.

THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Disembodied spirituality is antithetical to Incarnation and nigh impossible for us physical creatures. Seemingly intangible spiritual exercises of thought, meditation, and reflection are all dependent upon the tangible. Loving God with heart, mind, and strength is an organic undertaking. Yet so much of the sheer physicality of spirituality is overlooked, unconsidered—simply taken for granted.

Endowed with five physical senses, we tend to see these gifts merely as means to an end, as conduits of data, overlooking the inherent holiness of the sense itself. Just as we treat food as fuel, mindlessly ingesting food with little regard to its own integrity, so we absorb sensations with little appreciation for the sense that allows us to meet and mind the world around and within us. Just as each food is imbued with myriad properties of flavor, texture, and nutrition, so each sense is richly complex.

To limit “sensuality” to the realm of sex is to restrict the fullness of this word. Sensuality is pleasure in the physical. An integrated, embodied, incarnate spirituality fully pleasing to God and creature will delight in the sensate.

The season of Lent is an especially good time to embrace a heightened awareness—an intentional mindfulness—of the sensual. It’s a good time to pay attention to the physical connections and conduits of daily life.

In a culture not-so-subtly pushing us into “virtuality,” attention to and appreciation for the material ties of touch, taste, sight, sound, and smell are profound spiritual disciplines. Be mindful of the many wonders that greet and meet through sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. In their collective daily dance, they embody and welcome us to a communion of the sensory, and the sensational.

FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Support us . . . Lord, with your gracious favor through the fast we have begun; that as we observe it by bodily self-denial, so we may fulfill it with inner sincerity of heart. . . .

(from the Collect for Friday after Ash Wednesday,
Lesser Feasts and Fasts, 2006, page 30)

But how shall we undertake a “fast” of “bodily self-denial” and yet engage and enhance the sensual? Are these practices not in opposition to one another?

Well, only to a degree. Throughout our lives we learn that the limitations of our mortality demand that we must often sacrifice one thing in order to obtain another. So it is that if we’re literally to come to our senses, we’ll have to clear a path.

And a messy, scattered path it is.

My senses are fenced off and held at bay by all manner of hindering obstacles. If I wish to hear the person addressing me—or just the wind in the trees—I must remove the earpieces pumping throbbing rhythms into my head, or put down the phone pressed to my temple, or simply silence my own voice.

If I want to smell fresh air gently dampened by the lake and warmed by the sun, I have to step outside the mall, beyond the heavily perfumed scents of the cosmetic counters. I have to get past the ventilation fans pumping the fragrances of garlic, popcorn, and hot grease into the alleys. I have to move beyond the grates that carry the subway's strange but unique musk and the sewer's stench to the street above.

In other words, I must *fast*.

I must abstain or absent myself from certain practices and places. As a right beginning, I regard more intently all those obstructions and intrusions that dull, distract, or distort my essential senses. What must I give up in order to gain the senses I seek?