Before you say anything, I know: Ash Wednesday is not the same online. Of all the services we’ve had to adjust to doing digitally, this is one of the hardest for me because I appreciate its meaning and its form so much. There’s just no way to digitally approximate actually having ashes imposed upon you as a reminder of your mortality, a symbol of your repentance. There’s no way to digitally approximate the intimacy in being touched by another human being—or in touching another human being. As a pastor, I especially lament the powerful act of being trusted to be the one imposing those ashes on each of you, of being the person you have chosen to remind you that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. It is a profound and solemn duty, and one that I deeply appreciate and respect.

We’ve all had to give up so much this year; so much, that I’ve heard people ask the question if we even need Lent this year because we’ve been fasting for 48 weeks already; if we even need Ash Wednesday because this pandemic has been one giant reminder of our mortality. This service is going to be one of the last things we’ll have to give up for the first time during this pandemic; soon, we’ll be missing out on celebrating Holy Week and Easter in person again, just like we did last year.

It’s worth admitting that this observance of Ash Wednesday tonight—like so many other things—is not how we want it to be, not how it should be. To be able to say that—that things are not as they ought to be—and to be able to say it with other people and to have that solidarity with one another in our frustration, our disappointment, our sorrow, is powerful. Such communal lament is what reminds us that we are not alone in our grief. When we can’t make the pain go away, feeling the presence of others with us in the pain, knowing that we are not bearing it alone, is at least some comfort.

And that, my friends, is exactly why we observe Ash Wednesday every year. We smear ashes on our foreheads and spend an extra moment on confession of sin and are reminded of our dustiness because those things are all ways that we have to say together and publicly that things are not as they should be. Most years, we’re talking just about the “normal” ills of the world: things like war and disease, poverty and oppression, climate change and mass extinction. This year, our list includes pandemic, and the disruption, the isolation, and the grief that it brings with it.

In the Bible, folks who want to publicly acknowledge that things are not as they should be dress in sackcloth instead of their regular clothes, and they put ashes on their heads. It’s a visible sign that something is amiss. Often, it is a sign of mourning, an acknowledgement that someone has died and that this death has altered the world in a fundamental way for the person wearing the sign. It can also be a sign of repentance: an admission that I as a person or we as a community have not been doing the things we should be or being the people we ought to be, and that we have recognized that and are trying to change. That is the origin of this strange ritual we observe each year in February.

I think that wearing this physical sign, even if it is only in the church building for an hour or so, is an important thing for us to do because we have no other way of making that statement. I thought long and hard about what else I could do that could take the place of the imposition of ashes for this service this year, and I came up blank. But there’s a good reason for that: unlike the ancient Hebrews, or even many contemporary cultures, we don’t have any cultural signs of mourning or repentance. We have all sorts of rituals and traditions for marking celebrations—toasts, gift exchanges, songs, dances, parties, receptions—but we don’t have anything to mark grief, or regret, or sadness. We have funerals, but even those are beginning to die out (no pun intended) in favor of “celebrations of life,” because we don’t seem to think that there is room for public displays of grief.

When my dad died a couple of years ago, I found that I could not go back to life as it had been. I didn’t have the desire or the energy to go around crying or frowning all the time, but I needed something to acknowledge that, for me, the world was different, that I was different, that I had been changed by his death. I needed some physical sign that I was not the same person I had been before he died. Since we have no culturally recognized grieving rituals like wearing sackcloth or sprinkling ashes on our heads, I ended up wearing a beard—a particularly scraggly and patchy beard, if you recall. I intentionally didn’t shave or trim it (except to keep it out of my mouth) because it wasn’t a fashion statement. I didn’t feel the need to explain it to everyone, and I didn’t have to; whether people understood it or not, it made me look different; and that’s all I needed. Just some physical sign to say “something’s changed.”

Nobody likes to “dwell” on feeling bad, but consider the result: because we have no way to publicly express our desire for things to be different, to collectively telegraph our disappointment and frustration and invite people into our sadness and regret, these things remain bottled up until they explode in public expressions of anger and outrage like polarization, bigotry, protests, and violence.

Ash Wednesday is one of the few times and the few ways we have to acknowledge before God and everyone that this is not the world we want it to be, and to admit that this makes us feel sadness, regret, and even shame. It’s our opportunity to take off our plastered-on smiles for a moment and remind ourselves and everyone around us that sometimes, the world is kind of a mess; and sometimes, it’s our fault. Even the pandemic—a relatively random and unavoidable fluke of nature—has been made worse by mismanagement and poor messaging on the government level, and by the selfishness, denial and fear of ordinary people like us—maybe even of us ourselves.

But lamenting like this in community is not just about giving space to our feelings of disquiet. When we express our disappointment that things are not as they ought to be, we are also expressing our hope that there *is* a way things ought to be, that there is some entity, some force or will in the universe that has the right or the authority to determine “the way things ought to be.” Lament is fundamentally an expression of hope—hope that there is a greater Truth that exists beyond all our relativist perspectives.

Ash Wednesday and the imposition of ashes invites us into that hope for a vision of a world that is better and kinder and more just and loving that the one that exists. They give us hope that this vision isn’t just in our heads—that it is *real*, even if we don’t live up to that vision. When we acknowledge that we are not gods, that we are only creatures formed out of dust, waiting to return to dust, we are acknowledging that there is One greater than us who holds and casts this vision for us, and who promises us a place in it.

The invitation made to us in the season of Lent is to recommit ourselves to that vision, to turn from all the things we use to distract ourselves from the pains and difficulties of the world and stare into them so that we might hope for a world in which those things no longer have any power over us. We are invited to strengthen our spiritual practices or take up new ones to remind ourselves to look toward the vision of a better world—and also to see the ways we fail to live up to that vision. The cross of ashes we smear on our foreheads each year isn’t alone; it sits on top of another cross that was marked there at our baptism. The ashes just make that first cross visible, just as our failures make visible the vision to which we cannot live up; and that making visible is a grace. It reminds us who we are and whose we are; that even when that first cross is tarnished and soiled by our shortcomings, it is still there. The cross of ash is a sign that the ways we fail that vision do not negate the vision itself.

Just like the ash cross, our spiritual practices make that vision visible to us and the people around us. They remind us that the Divine Love has a claim on us; that we may be dust, but we are dust that has been ordered and formed and brought to life by the Divine Love that is still working to order and form this world and bring it to life, as well. They remind us that, while we are between dusts, we have been given the capacity and the responsibility to share that life with which our Maker has imbued us.

So yes, tonight is not the same as it has been. We’re not able to celebrate it as we would like to, or as we should, but to be honest, this discordant observance of Ash Wednesday makes the point just as clearly as the ash crosses we usually bear on our heads, and as the practices of prayer, fasting, and charitable giving that mark our lives as Christians. Even if it isn’t the way it ought to be, today we still enter into the season of Lent, and we still remember that nothing in this world is the way it ought to be. At least, not yet.