

# **WE ALL FALL DOWN**

## **Ash Wednesday Meditation, March 1, 2017**

### **Text: Luke 9:43-45**

Friends in Christ, every year at the time of the Christian Passover we celebrate our redemption through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Lent is a time to prepare for this celebration and to renew our life in the paschal mystery. We begin this holy season by acknowledging our need for repentance, and for the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Lent by self-examination and penitence, by prayer and fasting, by works of love, and by reading and meditating on the Word of God.

*("Invitation to the Observance of the Lenten Discipline," from the Book of Common Worship)*

We all know the childhood rhyme, "*Ring around the Rosie*." The way it works is that you all join hands and move in a circle (*which I am not going to ask you to do this evening: don't worry*) as you chant the words, "*Ring around the rosie, a pocket full of posies ...*" then on the phrase "*Ashes, ashes, we all fall DOWN!*", everyone falls to the ground, giggling and laughter breaks out, then everyone gets up and starts all over again. There are lots of stories about the origin of this nursery rhyme. One fairly popular one is that "*Ring around the Rosie*" comes from the 14<sup>th</sup> century and was a rhyme about the bubonic plague. Infected people with the plague would get circular sores with a red center ("*Ring around the Rosie*"), and the afflicted would gather pocketfuls of flower petals, or "posies," in order to help mask the decaying odor of those sores (*other sources say that a folk remedy for alleviating the soreness was various flower petals boiled with water*). People who died from the plague would then be cremated to reduce the spread of the disease ... "*Ashes, ashes, we all fall down*."

Interesting as this origin story might be, it is highly unlikely to be true. For one thing, there has never been found a written version of "*Ring around the Rosie*" before the 19th century; the earliest one found to date comes from 1812, some five centuries after the bubonic plague decimated half of Europe's population. Also, plague victims were rarely if ever cremated; faithful medieval Christians in Europe just didn't practice cremation. Cremation may have been the normal practice of the ancient Greeks, Romans and Hindus, but as the catacombs in Rome attest, the early Christians insisted on burying their dead (*as was also the long-standing Jewish tradition*<sup>1</sup>). Christian gravesites were called "coemeteria" (*where we get the word "cemeteries"*), which is Latin for "*sleeping chambers*," reflecting belief in a future resurrection. Christians practiced burial out of respect for the body being a temple, created by God, bearing His image; as the Holy Spirit saw fit to indwell the body, so Christians deemed it appropriate to treat bodies as vessels of honor. Also, as Jesus Himself was buried and raised bodily from the dead, so Christians believed their burial was a witness to the "*resurrection of the body*" yet to come. In fact, as best can be determined, the very first cremation in America took place in 1876, accompanied by readings from Charles Darwin and Hindu scriptures. For many years, relatively few persons chose cremation, but that is changing. Only 5% of Americans were cremated in 1962; by 2000, it was closer to 30%. To be clear, though, while Judeo-Christian tradition favors burial, the Bible nowhere explicitly *condemns* cremation. Since 1963 the Roman Catholic Church has permitted cremation while "earnestly recommending" burial as the preferred mode of disposition.<sup>2</sup>

Another interesting theory of the origin of "*Ring around the Rosie*" is that nursery rhymes often rehearse the primal aspects of our existence, thus helping prepare children for the inevitable. According to this explanation, the fear of "falling" by illness or death while dancing around life's rosy gardens is one such primal fear. Just when life seems to be rosier, the ashes of our mortality intrude; just when things seem to be the most pleasant and pleasurable, we are haunted by the fact that this won't last, that eventually we'll all "fall down." In this nursery rhyme we are trained early on to laugh at what we fear by singing about it, pretending to die, and then getting up again. So, this explanation goes, this children's game is a rehearsal of life, death, and resurrection.

No, I don't think that's the origin and/or deeper meaning of the rhyme, either, but it IS a great sermon illustration for Ash Wednesday! On Sunday, we commemorated the Transfiguration of Our Lord (*or, we would have it if didn't snow!*). What a pleasant, joyful, intensely satisfying experience for the disciples, who were given this glorious glimpse into the Kingdom of God. They saw clearly Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, shining brightly and intensely while conversing with a living Elijah and Moses there on that mountain. With the "pockets" of their senses stuffed full of the "posies" of divine delight and insight and affirmation, Peter, James, and John danced around the rosy vision of the Son of God; Peter even wanted to set up tents so they could all just stay there and keep this "*Ring around the Rosie*" dance going! But the very next day, according to our reading from Luke, the bright dance of the brilliant Transfiguration is rudely interrupted with Jesus' dark, ashy, shadowy words about betrayal, arrest, crucifixion; the ashes of death. And, of course, on Good Friday, Jesus falls down, and they all fall away.

<sup>1</sup> see [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/510874/jewish/Why-Does-Jewish-Law-Forbid-Cremation.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/510874/jewish/Why-Does-Jewish-Law-Forbid-Cremation.htm)

<sup>2</sup> much of this information may be found in <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/may21/27.66.html>

In churches today ashes are imposed and the words are spoken, *"From dust you came and to dust you shall return."* Ashes are a symbol of dust, and as many of you may remember there is a bit of a play on words in the Hebrew vocabulary here: Roughly transliterated, Dust is *Aphar*, and Ashes is *Ephar*. (*"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust" is much more poetic in the original Hebrew.*) The phrase *"From dust you came and to dust you shall return,"* goes all the way back to the third chapter of Genesis, just after the fall. God reminds Adam and Eve that one somber consequence of their disobedience is that one day they will die. The serpent had promised them they would not die, but the serpent was a lying snake. And now, death is part of life.

Now, we would like to forget that; we are still prone to believe the serpent's line that we will not die. As children, we assume we and our loved ones will never die. As teenagers, we sometimes drive cars too fast or experiment with alcohol and drugs and licentiousness as though we are somehow indestructible; death won't happen to us. This attitude often carries into young adulthood, as young adults we frequently court danger in the lifestyles and personal habits we pursue because, again, we think it won't happen to us. Even in our later years, we tend to take life for granted and naively assume that death will not overtake us anytime soon (*an assumption that starts to dissipate around, oh, age sixty-two*). We try to shut death out of our minds. But ashy realities always have a way of rudely intruding. A loved one does die. A teen is killed in an automobile accident or by an overdose. A robust young man falls off a cliff. A good friend becomes critically ill, or we become critically ill. The dance of life is suddenly stricken with the ashes of death and someone falls down, and the happy *"ring around the rosie"* collapses. The wonders and delights and achievements plucked along the way from life's beautiful gardens and stuffed in the pockets of memory, the *"pockets full of posies,"* do not save us from death's ashes. And when the ashes of our mortality intrude, we have a choice. We can react in anger and despair and bitterness as we see time running out on our dance of life, or we can lift up our heads in faith and confidence and hope toward the God Who promises life beyond the ashes of our mortality.

Ash Wednesday does confront us with the ashes of our mortality. It brings us back to the reality of our finitude. Ash Wednesday declares to us that the dust of death is our destiny. But that's only half of it! Ash Wednesday also stands at the beginning of Lent as a signpost pointing the way through the pain and suffering of our mortality to the resurrection of Easter, the sure promise of life eternal life! Yes, we all "fall down" eventually. Death is unavoidable; ashes, ashes we *do* all fall down. But by God's grace, on the other side of death is resurrection. We live, we die, and in Christ we are raised again to new life. We have God's Word on it. *That Word became flesh in Jesus Christ, Who was born like one of us, lived, died, and was raised again.* Therefore we are free to go ahead and keep on dancing around the ring of life's "rosies" filling our pockets full of the "posies" that come from good memories, wholesome deeds performed, good works carried out, right up until the ashes come and we all fall down. Then as redeemed children of the heavenly Father, we fall freely into His arms. We even dare to laugh as we fall, because we know that, by our Father's grace, we will be raised again to live and dance forever ... all because of the work our Lord Jesus Christ carried out in this holy Lenten season, the annual commemoration of which we commence this day. Amen.

## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

*(Adapted from Lenten Prayers of the Day, Book of Common Worship, c. 1993)*

Almighty God, your Son fasted forty days in the wilderness, and was tempted as we are but did not sin.

GIVE US GRACE TO SO DIRECT OUR LIVES IN OBEDIENCE TO YOUR SPIRIT, THAT AS YOU KNOW OUR WEAKNESS, SO WE MAY KNOW YOUR POWER TO SAVE;

Through Jesus Christ our Redeemer,

WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

O Lord God, You led Your people through the wilderness and brought them to the promised land.

SO GUIDE US, THAT, FOLLOWING OUR SAVIOR, WE MAY WALK THROUGH THE WILDERNESS OF THIS WORLD TOWARD THE GLORY OF THE WORLD TO COME;

Through Jesus Christ our Lord,

WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

God of the covenant, as the forty days of deluge swept away the world's corruption and watered new beginnings of righteousness and life,

THROUGHOUT THESE NEXT FORTY DAYS, SO UNSEAL WITHIN US THE WELLSPRING OF YOUR GRACE, CLEANSE OUR HEARTS OF ALL THAT IS NOT HOLY, AND CAUSE YOUR GIFT OF NEW LIFE TO FLOURISH ONCE AGAIN.

Grant that we, being born again of water and the Spirit, may joyfully serve You in newness of life and faithfully walk in Your holy ways;

THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD, WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU IN THE UNITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.