
Old Skin Slips Into Dust

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:6

I salute each of you here today. When this day is done, you will be part of a fairly small group. Not all Christians seem to participate in Ash Wednesday. Not all Episcopalians do. Not all the members of this very church participate!

Maybe they are too busy. So be it. You and I are busy, too. We have things to do and people to meet. We have daily routines and schedules to keep. But today, Ash Wednesday, is part of a larger schedule. Today, Ash Wednesday, is part of a larger routine. If we do not keep this day, then the dark side of this day will overwhelm us.

There is a dark side of this day. At its most obvious, this is the side that most folks in the outside world see. They see a bunch of earnest Christians lining up to have ashes smudged on our foreheads. How gruesome that seems! Why obsess about sin?

It is not an obsession, I answer. Rather, today is an acknowledgment. Today is a remembrance of the truth. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

But what folks in the outside world do not see is the other, more silent movement of this day. We are meant to acknowledge and to give up and to release the dark side of our lives. We acknowledge this dark side intentionally. If not, then the dark side, the side of sin, will overtake us when we are unaware. Our sin will sabotage us if we do not know how to consciously confess it. The release of our sin occurs silently, almost invisibly, just as Jesus advises in the gospel of Matthew, almost invisible to the streets. Silently, we release our sin, like a snake shedding its skin; but it is the most powerful element of this day.

Yes, for some reason, this dark side of life has always been associated with the snake. Remember the snake in the garden? I want to talk about snakes today. I know that snakes are scary. In fact, I am personally scared to death of them.

But I've also grown up around them. I look for them when I walk outside, even here in Atlanta, Georgia. Last spring, I saw three copperheads in one week, within a mile radius of the Cathedral of St. Philip. They're here! We just don't usually see them. Look for some snakes on Ash Wednesday.

Yes, I like looking for snakes, even though I am scared to death of them. Show me a person who does not acknowledge a fear of snakes, and I'll show you a fool. Snakes are scary.

But fear of snakes does not mean we should avoid snakes.

In fact, we can learn from snakes. There is another part of me that enjoys snakes. I have walked among them. I have even dreamed about them (don't tell Sigmund Freud!).

In my dreams, when I can walk through snakes easily, then I know that I am free from anxiety. That has always been an interior signal for me. When I dream about snakes fearlessly, I know that something good is occurring in my soul.

When I grew up walking in the woods, I often saw snakes. But I also saw something else. I often saw snake skins. Have you ever seen a snake skin in the woods or in some lab or museum? I urge you to look for one. They are here. They are delicate, beautiful things, thin and transparent.

They are the result of growth. Every year, the snake sheds his skin, and it is a beautiful development. The snake grows another skin from the inside out. One day, the inside is simply too beautiful, too strong, for the old skin. The new growth simply overtakes the old, and the snake silently slips out of the old skin, revealing a new skin that has been growing all along.

If we grow, we have to shed skin. We human beings do it in a different way, but it's similar. We shed skin all the time. I do not remember what the statistics are, but you heard them once. How many skin cells do we rub away whenever we brush our hair, or wash our hands, or shave, or merely slide our hands along a rail? We are rubbing skin cells off ourselves all the time; some say that is the material that becomes dust around us.

In order to grow, we must shed skin. It is a fact of life.

But the snake teaches us something important this time of year, as we prepare for spring, for Easter itself. The best way to shed skin is not to scrape it off painfully or prematurely, creating rawness and pain. Instead, the best way to shed skin is to let the new growth outgrow the old. Put your energy in the new growth, in that inner layer that is growing, even now, and which will soon push away the old. The old did its time. It was valuable. But the new overtakes the old. It does so every year and even every day.

This growth is what Ash Wednesday is about. We gather, by routine, every year, to acknowledge that fact. We have a dark side that needs to be acknowledged, to be forgiven, and then released. If we do not, or cannot release it, we will be stuck, like a snake unable to shed its skin.

If we can release sin, if we can learn to do it by routine, then we are set free to grow. This is the larger routine of life, in which we participate today. It is fact of life. In order to grow, we take time, intentionally, to give up the old. The old slides away into dust. The new grows fresh into spring.

AMEN.

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