When I first came to be the rector at Grace Church, I was introduced to some traditions that I had never been exposed to before. After serving in about seven different churches as a volunteer and then a staff member and then various internships in the process of ordination, I’ve seen Episcopal Churches practice a variety of customs and traditions. Each of the various traditions reflects the personality and preferences of the particular where they are practiced. They are unique to each particular congregation. While the practices at each church may be slightly different they are all supported by the one book that ties all Episcopal Churches together… The Book of Common Prayer.

Even though that book is rarely opened in worship these days, the content of it guides us in everything we do as a church. Every church that holds an Ash Wednesday service follows the same liturgy. The liturgy we are using this evening is the one being used universally across the church on this day. The one tradition I discovered at Grace that I had never before experienced was burning the palm leaves from Palm Sunday the previous year to produce the ashes to be used for Ash Wednesday. The traditional time for the burning here at Grace is the evening of the pancake supper. The traditional place for the burning is the parking lot outside of Grace House.

We had to let that tradition go during COVID since we couldn’t have the Pancake Supper. That year, Jeff Patnaude and I met and burned them on the portico behind the office spaces. The wind was so brisk that it was hard to keep the ashes in one pot! But it really doesn’t matter where we get the ashes. The wearing of ashes, along with sackcloth, comes from an ancient Hebrew tradition of mourning and repentance. The ashes were an outward sign of deep humility, shame and grief. Sackcloth was coarse, rough and thick cloth made of black goat’s hair. The misery of wearing sackcloth reflected the inner misery of the one who wore it.

Today we forgo the sackcloth and the ashes alone are our outward sign of humility before God. The dark gray dusty particles are an important symbol of our mortality set in stark contrast compared to the glow of God’s divinity. The ashes symbolize our finitude. They remind us of what our bodies will ultimately become. They remind us that our earthly lives are limited. They remind us that we ultimately belong to God. Our flesh is marked with a pending but elusive expiration date. We are but dust, and to dust we shall return.

Remember that old saying, “you are what you eat?” Well, isn't it also true in some cases that you are what you wear? I know my husband loves to wear his orange and blue bow tie when UVA wins a basketball or football game. We know lately that he hasn’t worn that tie very often this year. But still, by wearing that tie it shows that he identifies as a UVA Cavalier, a Wahoo. We have that kind of swag for the Yard Sale, too. Grace Yard Sale Volunteers wear hats or aprons or Tshirts that identify themselves. The institutions we identify with, schools or churches, shape our lives in some way. We wear an ash cross on our foreheads so that everyone we see will know whose we really are. Doesn’t the cross on our foreheads identify that we have been shaped by the one who died on a cross, the one who came to save our souls?

The ashes are imposed in the image of a cross. I know sometimes it looks like a smudge but there are actually two lines of ashes imposed there. First there is a vertical line. That line that represents the connection that exists between you and God. Then there is a second horizontal line that represents the connection between you and all the other people in your life. The place where the two lines intersect represents the Christ in you, the intersection of the human and the divine. God plants a divine seed inside every created being.

The season of Lent begins today. Lent is a time set aside to nourish that seed that God planted inside us. Lent is a time to pull out and dispose of the weeds that keep that seed from flourishing. We might choose to nourish our divine spirits by reading reflections from daily devotionals. We have provided one by Henri Nouwen, who wrote and who was The Wounded Healer. It is on a table in the hallway outside the library. Or maybe you prefer a more active type of contemplation while practicing yoga or tai chi. You might choose to form a group that walks a labyrinth every week while focusing on Jesus’ journey to and through the cross.

Or maybe you’d like to take the approach of ridding yourself of a habit that gets in the way of being in relationship with God. I remember one year during the ‘90s, I found myself too wrapped up in American politics. I watched C-SPAN every morning relentlessly. I just loved the anchor of that morning show Brian Lamb who made turbulent times seem navigable. I found myself trusting Brian Lamb more than I trusted God. I had set my heart on earthly things and allowed human struggles for power and control to get the best of me. So I quit watching. I gave it up for Lent never intending to let it go forever.. But something happened when I got rid of that habit. I recentered myself in the divine and my outlook changed. I realized that earthly principalities, wars, famines and natural disasters come and go. But God, Christ and the Holy Spirit are always always always there for me. They are always there for us. On them we can all rely. Where and in whom do you put your ultimate trust?

In this season of Lent, whether you add a discipline or give up a habit, each time you practice that discipline, allow yourself to draw just a bit closer to God. Each time you find yourself turning away from your old habit, remember to intentionally turn toward God. Deepen your trust by turning over those things that trouble you, those things over which you have no control, to God. In Matthew’s gospel Jesus asked, “Which of you by worrying has ever added a single hour to the span of his or her life?” (Mt 6:27) Indeed, worry might very well subtract an hour or a year or more from your life. One way or another, these next forty days of Lent are set aside to strengthen your connection with God. The quality of our relationship with God affects the balance and breadth of our relationships with each other.

Your relationship with God, your trusting and faithful relationship with God, is symbolized by the strong, vertical beam of the cross you will be wearing. It stretches upwards from the holy ground you stand on upward toward God above you. Your relationships with other people are symbolized by the horizontal beam. It marks encounters you had, have and will have with people across the various stages of your life. Open wide like the arms of Christ, the cross beam represents the welcome you have offered and will offer to other people who come into your life. The place where the God beam of the cross and the human relationship beam come together is where your heart, the heart of Jesus and the heart of God overlap. Each heart lies over the other in intimate connection. The three hearts beat together in rhythm as one … They beat together now and forever, even when our bodies turn to dust.