Marked

by John Buchanan in the March 6, 2013 issue

The church of my childhood paid no attention to either Advent or Lent. The words of those seasons sounded too mystical to us, too indicative of strange beliefs and the practices of Roman Catholic friends who didn't eat meat on Friday, crossed themselves at the free throw line and, of all things, showed up at school one February or March morning with dirt on their foreheads. I suspect I'm not the only one who tried to be helpful by pointing out to a friend that there was dirt on his forehead, only to be told that he knew it was there, that it wasn't dirt but ashes and that a priest put it there.

Such a practice was decidedly unlike the straightforward simplicity of my Presbyterian tradition and my church, where the very first appearance of candles in worship precipitated an argument between those who loved candles and those who thought candles were a Catholic thing.

In this issue of the *Century*, Ted Smith remembers when Lent was, for Protestants, not much more than the One Great Hour of Sharing cardboard boxes that children filled with pennies and nickels for children somewhere else in the world ("Making Lent difficult"). In my youth my Catholic friends would announce that they had to

give up something for Lent, at which point my chums and I would have great fun trivializing the whole business by announcing that we were giving up spinach or brussels sprouts for Lent. We thought we were hilarious.

Now, like many others, I've come full circle. Thanks to the liturgical renewal movement, which introduced Protestants to the meaning and beauty of the liturgical year observances, I began to appreciate the rhythm of the liturgical seasons and now cannot imagine being without them.

At a staff meeting early in my pastorate in Chicago, we discussed introducing the imposition of ashes during an Ash Wednesday service. We talked about the theology behind it and admitted to each other that many of our people would be leery of it if not hostile to it. I kept hearing the voice of my Presbyterian grandmother, who was convinced that there was a Vatican plot to take over the world and that we should be vigilant about "creeping Romanism."

Eventually we decided to try offering the imposition of ashes. Then we realized that we didn't have the slightest notion of where the ashes came from. So we called our friends at nearby Holy Name Cathedral, who patiently explained that they burned left-over palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday celebration, gathered the ashes, stored and mixed them with a little oil (it helps if the ashes adhere to the forehead, but be careful—too much oil results in a runny mess) and brought them out for use on Ash Wednesday.

Then came a kind offer. "Would we like to use some of Holy Name's ashes?" Of course we would. I began to sense that we were recovering an old and meaningful ritual and symbol and that we were joining in a public witness of the ecumenical church.

All went well. Not everyone came forward that first year, but there were enough participants to prevent embarrassment. Now the imposition is done at several Ash Wednesday services, and Presbyterian ministers have learned how to burn palms and mix the ashes with oil.

I am always deeply moved to witness the Ash Wednesday ritual in a church that's located in the midst of a bustling American city and surrounded by high-end hotels, department stores and boutiques. One sees some people leaving the service dressed in business suits or stylish coats and heels and others in the tattered garb of the homeless—all with ashes on their foreheads, all carrying that stark reminder of

mortality.

Every year it is startling to be looked in the eye, usually by a much younger clergyperson, and told, “John, remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.” I’m not sure how we would celebrate Easter without this simple but eloquent reminder of our humanity and our mortality.