

Sermon for Ash Wednesday
March 1, 2006 7 a.m./noon
St. Mary of the Hills, Blowing Rock, NC
The Rev. Jeanne Finan

Wabi-sabi

I have a word for you this Ash Wednesday morning.

Wabi-sabi.

That's right-- *wabi-sabi*.

(This is not to be confused with *wasabi*—
which is that green horseradish paste
they serve you with sushi.

The word for today is *wabi-sabi*.)

Wabi-sabi is the Japanese tradition of celebrating the beauty
in what is flawed or worn.¹

This tradition emerged in the 15th century
as a reaction to an abundance (*overabundance*, probably)
of lavishness, richness, and ornamentation.

Wabi-sabi is the art of finding beauty in imperfection,
in honest simplicity.

Wabi-sabi is the profound reverence for authenticity,
and centers around three elements:

Nothing lasts.
Nothing is finished.
Nothing is perfect.

And that seems to me,
to make *wabi-sabi* a very fine Lenten companion.

Wabi-sabi and Lent remind us that we are all transient beings—
that our bodies and all other material things around us
are in the on-going, irreversible process
of becoming dust.

Indeed, there really is little point in storing up treasures on earth—
yet so much of our every day lives focus on just that.

Our grey hairs, our rust spots, our frayed edges —
all little reminders

that we are not going to be around forever.

Yet there is a lot of advertising money spent trying to convince us otherwise.

¹ Robyn Griggs Lawrence, "Wabi-Sabi: The Art of Imperfection," Utne Reader, October 2001, page 48-50.

It is hard to reject our culture's dominant message
that our lives should center around
achieving physical and financial perfection.

Is this what God really calls us to do?

Ash Wednesday is a good day to begin a fast from our desire to be perfect.
Ash Wednesday is a good day to pray for wholeness
and to begin a self-examination
that is centered in God,
not in Madison Avenue marketing.

Our gospel reading this morning cautions us against
zealously striving for spiritual perfection.

To be absolutely honest,
for too many years I thought this is what Lent is all about:

*Okay, I've got 40 days to get it right,
to get my spiritual life in perfect order,
so take a deep, very pious breath and....*

So wrong.
So anti-*wabi-sabi*.
So forgetful of the mercy of God.

Wabi-sabi is such a good word.
It's a word that makes you sort of giggle.
I think that makes it perfect for Lent,
a time in our church year that we should take seriously,
but, at the same time,
we do not need to become
the new super hero (or super heroine)
of spiritual overachievement.

We need to forgive ourselves, forgive others---
practice the art of seeing the beauty of imperfection.
We need to really believe that God hates nothing God creates,
that we are pardoned, forgiven, loved by God.

Lent is a season to ponder where our treasures will be stored,
where hearts will be focused.
Lent is a season that offers us time
to pray for the revealing of the chipped vase
that is our real life.

I am not an expert of *wabi-sabi*.

I have read one article,

an article I discovered in an ancient issue of the *Utne Reader* magazine,
discovered as I sat in a waiting room,
waiting, waiting.

The one article I read about *wabi-sabi*, said this:

*Wabi-sabi depends on the ability to slow down, to shift the balance
from doing to being, to appreciating rather than perfecting.*

To me that sounds like a very good beginning to a holy Lent.