

Torn Shirt

Tearing our garments and dumping ashes on our heads to demonstrate our repentance are anachronistic today. What replaces them in our lives as we enter Lent?

by Tom Engel

One day I was visiting my parents, and I was wearing my favorite sweatshirt bought on our last fishing trip in Minnesota. The shirt had a big smallmouth bass jumping out of the water embroidered on the front. While sitting at the kitchen table, I glanced down at my arm and saw a small tear on the sleeve. I don't know how it happened. Something sharp must have attacked me when I wasn't looking.

My brain raced to find a solution. Going back to Minnesota was not an immediate option. No one could sew it or patch it without the tear

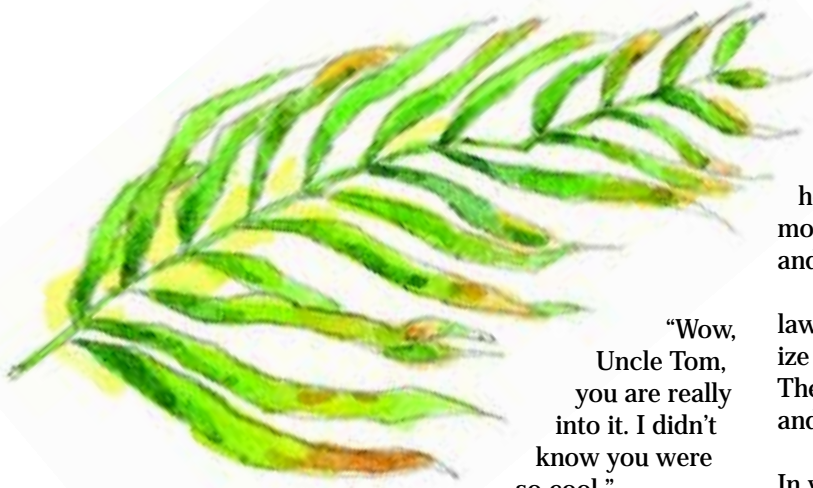
looking "fixed." Would my new sweatshirt have to become my next work shirt? I wasn't ready for this sweatshirt to be downgraded to a rag.

I was feeling glum about my shirt when Courtney, my 18-year-old niece, walked in with her pierced eyebrow and "messy" haircut. (She had just graduated from hair-styling school and was conscious of the latest styles.)

She gave me a hug, looked at my shirt and said, "Uncle Tom, did you do that to your shirt or did you buy it that way?"

Cautiously I said, "I did it."





“Wow, Uncle Tom, you are really into it. I didn’t know you were so cool.”

I didn’t know I was so cool, either. But I was starting to feel better about my ripped sweatshirt. I said with confidence, “Yeh, I’m cool. I’ll show you some more of my clothes later.” I was thinking what other sharp objects I could rub against to get more of my clothes in style.

I’ve kept that shirt and wear it often. As a matter of fact, I’m thinking about wearing it to Ash Wednesday service. Not because it’s in style, but for another purpose. Wearing torn clothes is a sign of mourning. On the first day of Lent, maybe everyone could wear their old torn clothes made of the roughest materials to worship.

This method of mourning goes back to Genesis where Jacob mourned when he heard of the death of his son Joseph. The news was false, but at the time he believed it to be true. In his grief, he tore his clothes and wore sackcloth.

Daniel fasted, wore sackcloth, and dumped ashes on his head as he asked God to forgive the sins of the nation of Israel. Now *this* is demonstrating repentance.

Ash Wednesday is the day when we begin a six-week journey to the cross of Christ. We remember again Jesus’ death on the cross and all that it means.

In the late third or early fourth century, the Roman church began the tradition of Lent. Adults seeking Baptism after going through three years of study would enter into final preparations before being baptized during the Easter vigil. The final preparation was mostly about a spiritual humbling. Ash Wednesday was later given its name because the new members received ashes on their foreheads to remind them of their sins, mortality, and need for repentance.

Whether or not you choose to wear sackcloth or to receive and wear ashes as a sign of your humanness,



the point is that during Lent you reflect on your relationship with God.

In Psalm 51, David looked back at his sin when he had committed adultery. We can hear David’s mourning over his sin, “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me” (Ps. 51:3).

We, too, know we have sinned. The light of God’s law shines brightly on us, and we cannot help but realize we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The hard fact is true; we are poor miserable sinners and are seemingly without hope.

At the beginning of Lent, we search our hearts. In what areas are we far from God and His will for our lives? Are there people from whom we need to seek forgiveness? Are there people we need to forgive? What in our life needs to be made right?

Even as we reflect on our relationship with God and others, we have to honestly admit that we have failed in many ways. When we examine our lives and see very little that shows God’s glory, we can only mourn over our sins.

On the bookshelf in my office, I have saved the palm branches from last year’s Palm Sunday. They are there for two reasons: they make a nice decoration, and they are awaiting this year’s Ash Wednesday service, when I will burn some of them to make ashes. The palms once used to honor our King, Jesus, will be used as a symbol to show our sins. We mourn today, but we also are filled with joy. Blessing, honor, and mourning are here today in the ashes of once-green palms.

We, like David, still have hope. David says, “Restore me to the joy of your salvation” (Ps. 51:12). When we repent in sorrow over our sins, we find God’s grace and mercy. Our hope is fulfilled. We have forgiveness for every sin. Our lives are filled with peace, comfort, and joy.

From Ash Wednesday to Easter, we go from mourning to joy. Sin, death, and the devil have been defeated. The battle has been won. The victory that Christ won for us by His death and resurrection is ours.

If you ever see me in my favorite torn sweatshirt, you might think that I need some new clothes. Well, I’m just wearing the latest style! Wearing sackcloth and dumping ashes on our heads may not fit well with a modern worship style, and we don’t have to have the symbols to mourn over our sins. But we can think about these symbols to help us repent of our sins and know of the forgiveness we have in Christ.

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