

Sermon for Ash Wednesday

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In years past, when Ash Wednesday's rolled around, I've tried to think of some catchy way to come at what this day's all about. Maybe it's a Roman soldier whispering in his conquering emperor's ear "Memento mori," "remember that you will die." Or maybe it was the time I talked about preparing for my first confession, or the year that St. Valentine and Ash Wednesday both fell on Feb 14, or the year we noticed that even fast food places took on Lenten disciplines by adding fish specials to their menus. It seems there's rarely a shortage of reminders of our mortality these days. I looked back and was curious what I'd written, what you heard, right before the pandemic closed our doors in 2020. It was fine, I suppose. Mostly it was just a reflection on encountering the great democratic state that is death. "In death we are all equal" could've been the elevator pitch that year.

But that year, and the Ash Wednesdays since have taught us that that's not entirely true, at least not as true as our poets would have us believe. With the pandemic, we've seen that, yes, we are all mortal, and yes, there is a bit of democratic randomness to who tests positive and who gets hit hardest. But death isn't distributed equally. When the wealthy test positive, they have access to treatments many don't. When the middle class test positive, they have less at their fingertips but more than others still. And when the poor come up positive, it's a roll of the dice. There's layers to this, too. Age and health are less determinative than race and zip code when it comes to Covid. And the lasting factors confound even more. It's less poetic, but perhaps we could rewrite that three-year old elevator pitch to say "Once we die, we are all equal, but in the meantime, death prowls a little closer to everyone who's already having a hard time."

In other words, this year, I'm less interested in the reminder of our mortality itself and more interested in the privilege we exercise in this day. Our custom of wearing ashes reminds us that we are mortal and that the ones we love are mortal, too. And we tend to need that reminder because death often seems far enough away that we can forget, or at least reasonably hope today won't be that dreaded day. But with war in Ukraine, for example, or devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, I wonder how ashes in places like that must feel, where mortality is hauntingly close always, the smell of it filling the skies where crocus blossoms and dandelions ought to be instead. Do our ashes look like solidarity to them, equality in death, or do they feel like a playacting masquerade?

I don't know the answer to that question. But I do know that in 2018, the most haunting image I saw of Ash Wednesday came from a school in Parkland, Florida where the mother of a child who had been shot wept, held by a group of other terrified parents, her face contorted in pain and anger and fear with the black smudge of ash on her horrified forehead. And I know that in 2020, I naively preached about mortality as a theoretical thing, an idea that applies to us all but really only comes when it's time, or if earlier, as an isolated tragedy. I preached that in 2020. The next year, as we muddled through Ash Wednesday without gathering in-person, we imagined our masks as that year's version of ashes, a constant reminder of a hovering threat.

But last year, last year I did not, could not gather to mark this day, could not consider war or disaster or theory or social imbalance. Because last year, I brushed far too close to my own mortality. I'm sure, had I emerged from my cave and had I been able to walk or asked a friend to come to my bedside, I could've borne the ashes. Physically, I could've. But I don't know if I could've borne those ashes in my soul. Every day was a reminder of the frailty of life and the nearness of death. Every morning, even as senses returned and I slowly gained stamina, every morning brought another question: "what now? What next?" And least helpful, "why?" God knows, I didn't need reminders of the hold mortality keeps on us. And I also didn't need reminders of

saccharine assurances that “this too shall pass” or “God has a plan.” What I needed was time, and patience, and, like an injured dog, a porch to hide under (or, as it turned out, a set of grandma’s quilts to hide under).

This year, I’m a little more aware of what mortality means. I think we all are, increasingly so. And it makes me wonder why we do this thing we do. I’m sure I’ll change my thoughts on this just about every year, but at least today, I wonder if the reminder “that you are dust and to dust you shall return,” holds a hidden, unspoken meaning. Yes, we are mortal. Yes, we will each of us die. And yes, that probably means I need to get over myself. But I wonder if the gift on the other side is this: that in the meantime, we live. Until that great democratic scythe comes down, we live. And knowing that once death arrives we are equal, we live with purpose. We know all too well where the world has failed, but we can choose lives of service and love and aid. We know where the world is broken, we know where people suffer, we even know where we’ve caused suffering, but we can choose to make life a little sweeter, to repair what we’ve broken, to serve where chaos arrives, and to love the shimmer of light in every living thing.

Death may be democratic, it may not, but that long road to dust doesn’t have to be cast entirely in shadow. There is room for life along the way. I know it’s a little weird to think of death in such an optimistic way, but maybe there’s something there. Because before death comes, most of us have about 2.5 billion heartbeats to love each other. We have about 673 million breaths to inspire each other. We have about 230,000 hours to give each other rest. And we have but one life to live, one life to live for each other, one life to live for love, one life to live for God. So remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.