

Sermon for Ash Wednesday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Lord, have mercy.

When we started this journey almost a year ago, I never imagined we'd be here today. Some of you may recall, I read a statement recalling times the church has taken a step back, times when our ways of being and our ways of serving have shifted while something in the world rages. Our own St. Thomas' took a break in 1918 as the Spanish flu ran its course. Fr. Steve's churches did, too, and when they had a rare entry for a service performed here and there, no one entered in the number of people present. They just said, "attendance fair," or more often, "attendance poor." Well, we've certainly served as graceful inheritors of our past this year. Somehow, we've held steady, and in some ways, we've even managed to grow. There's been no fair-to-poor in how we've been church since 2020 struck. That's encouraging for someone like me when I look at hard data. Flipping through our attendance records and pledge contributions, you'd hardly know this was a challenging year. But one step away from the ledgers and registers shows just how hard this year has been.

Ash Wednesday usually marks a clear progression in the life of the church. We shift from seasons of life and the celebration of birth to today's painful reminder of death. We watch as Jesus turns his face from preaching and ministry back towards Jerusalem, and with it The Cross and the grave. And we know, as he makes that turn, that we make that turn with him, shifting our focus in depth of winter to our own mortality. Yes, Easter waits on the other side, and with it crocuses and lilies and new life abundant. But to get to Easter, there's a long and sometimes painful road ahead. We know all that. Most of us have been doing Lent for many years, now. This is my 30th, give or take, and I know many of you have seen Lent come and go two or even three times that.

Except the last one. Somehow today feels less like a shift into a new season. Instead, today feels more like an anniversary. We started Lent last year like normal, with the annual *memento mori*, the reminder of our mortality borne in the ashes on our heads. But when our churches closed on the Third Sunday of Lent, even though we kept going in the calendar, even though we did palms and lit the new fire and raised the forgotten alleluias on Easter, even though we called in far-off family members and packed our screens tighter than our pews, even though we did all those things as best we could, it never quite felt like we truly left Lent behind. So today, we mark the passage of time a little differently. Some of you have already gotten your ashes, some will soon, some may opt out this time around. And that's ok. Because you're here. Or you're wherever you are. You are trying to be faithful, but if you're anything like most of the people I've been talking to lately, more than anything, you're surviving.

There's something to surviving that I don't think I really appreciated before coronatide. "Surviving" to me means something a little different from "living." Living seems to mean all systems go. Maybe not quite as good as something like "thriving," but still pretty good. "Surviving," on the other hand, feels like there's something wrong. You're making it, but only just able to stay ahead of whatever it is that's hounding you. This year, we're all surviving, all too aware of the regular pains and ailments of life amplified by the massive existential threat that is the coronavirus. We're hounded, steadily, suffering immeasurable loss in slow motion, unable to breath or stand or touch how we used to, how we need to. We are surviving, and sometimes we're not doing much more than that.

Ash Wednesday is meant to be a lone day in a year-long calendar when we reflect deeply on our own mortality. And even though Lent is tough, Lent usually gives us a respite from that morbid reflection. We reflect intensely today, and then we get on with preparing to see our Lord. Maybe it isn't right to say we never left Lent last year. Maybe we never even left Ash Wednesday. The way we've had to live, the way we've had to survive, has kept us painfully aware of our own mortality constantly. Daily updates on rising statistics, death toll, and

worried text check-ins with far-off family (or close-by family quarantine in another half of the house), they've all kept our fragile mortality squarely in the middle of our vision. Even a trip to the grocery store has become a thrilling act of either heroism or hubris. We've been stuck in that place, stuck in today for a long year. It's that *memento mori* thing all over again, everywhere we look. For those of you that aren't familiar, *memento mori* was an ancient tradition for the Romans. It was the job of a regular foot soldier, when a conquering general rode his chariot triumphantly back into Rome, it was the soldier's job to whisper in his ear "memento mori," which means, "remember that you will die." The ashes we receive today are just that, a *memento mori*, a reminder that we will die. Even the words make that clear: "remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Ash Wednesday is a fast set aside for that reminder. And we wear the reminder on our faces as we enter the world.

But this year, I wonder about these ashes. We've done a lot of shifting of our traditions to meet the demands of our current, extended Lent-like year, our year-long Ash Wednesday. We've done a lot of weighing what's necessary for our services and what's best to set aside for a season. You may have done the ashes, you may still, and that's fine. But I wonder about adopting something a little different in the new season of the church bittersweetly referred to as "Coronatide." I wonder if we've been wearing a constant reminder of our mortality for these past 340 days. I wonder if this mask has become the *memento mori* of our year, the steady and unavoidable reminder worn on our faces that one day, we too will die. We wear these masks because we acknowledge our own mortality and the mortality of everyone else. We wear them because, even though they are inconvenient and uncomfortable and sometimes in need of a trip through the washing machine, we wear them because we are doing more than just remembering our mortality. We are honoring it. I wonder if there's a way for us to embrace this *memento mori* in a sacred light. Instead of rushing out the door and forgetting to grab it on the way out or putting it on with a roll of the eye and a sense of resentment, I wonder if there's a way to lean into this. We're so used to moving in the world in a way that refuses to acknowledge our own fragility or even the fragility of those we encounter, and these masks remind us that we can love those we love by cherishing their vulnerabilities.

Now, I know this may be a lot to ask of a simple strip of cloth. But simple strips of cloth have done this and more for ages past. Simple strips of cloth swaddled Jesus in the manger, and simple strips of cloth wrapped his fragile, broken body as he was laid in the tomb. The hem of his garment alone was enough to cure, and his robe wrapped around his waist dried the washed feet of his followers. Simple strips of cloth became sacred for our ancestors time and time again. Maybe it's time they become sacred for us. The next time you put on your masks, and I'll do this too, the next time you put on your masks, remember this. Remember your mortality. Remember the mortality of those you will meet. And remember the sacredness of the gift you are giving them by taking on this new *memento mori*.

We will survive. We will live, we will rise, and one day we will thrive again. But for now, for today, remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return.