

Ash Wednesday 2010

“I’m sorry,” the doctor says to you one day, after many tests and many treatments. “There’s nothing really I can do. You’re going to die.”

Imagine how you might feel in that instant. The shock. The terror. The disbelief. Sick to your stomach. Faint. Disoriented, as though you had just been slapped.

“There’s nothing really I can do. You’re going to die.” *Die? you think. DIE? No! There is still too much to do. Too many people to love. Too many sunrises or sunsets still to see. Die? I’m going to die? How can it be that I am going to die?*

And yet, isn’t that why you have come here today, why all of us have gathered here today? To receive the dirty, grainy smear of ash upon the brow and hear again and again those words: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” You hear them as the cross is rubbed into your pores: “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” You hear them as each person here is marked with ash: “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

“I’m sorry,” I might as well say instead, as I mark each forehead here today. “I’m sorry. There’s nothing really I can do. You’re going to die.”

“Well, yes,” you might reply, “but not TODAY.” We come here on Ash Wednesday to be reminded of our mortality, sure, but for most of us, it is a hazy mortality. It floats out there some time far off in the distance, after a long and enjoyable retirement, when we have lived full and happy lives, when there’s nothing more to be accomplished, then yes, then one day we’ll just quietly die, with no pain, no hospitals, no nursing homes -- preferably in our own beds, in our sleep.

Even those of us here who are much older and who know that inevitable moment is coming aren't quite ready to hear those clear, cold, implacable words. "Remember that you are dust. There's nothing really I can do. To dust you shall return. You're going to die."

That is a hard, hard truth. And it is the work of Ash Wednesday, the work of the season of Lent, and the work, really, of our entire lives to come to terms with this hard, hard truth – the reality of our own mortality. To come to accept it. To gaze at it with clear eyes, to see it for the certainty it is. To somehow say, "Yes, I am dust. Yes, I am going to die," without fleeing or flinching, without deception and denial. And so we come here today to have our faces rubbed in it, to be smeared with the dark, ashen truth of our human finitude.

But there is another, deeper truth inside the ashen cross that will be smudged upon your brow in just a few minutes. The ashes themselves are paradoxical. They are not merely ash. They are not just the dusty remains of the palms from last year's Palm Sunday. In order to bind them together, so that they will leave that dark mark upon your skin, the fluffy, flaky ashes need something that will hold them together. That something we use is chrism. The oil of baptism, the same oil that is used when I trace a cross on the forehead of a brand-new Christian and say, "You are sealed with the sign of the cross, and marked as Christ's own forever."

That is the paradox of Ash Wednesday. Yes, we are dust. Yes, we are going to die. But guess what? We have ALREADY died. We already drowned in the waters of baptism. We already died to our old selves. We have already been crucified with Christ. We have been marked as Christ's own forever, buried with him in a death like his, so that we can be resurrected into a life like his.

That's why Saint Paul can write this strange, paradoxical litany of his life to his troublesome church in Corinth. The Corinthians haven't gotten it yet. They don't understand that they can live in complete and open acceptance of life and all its sorrows, and yet know that those sorrows – even death itself -- are not the final word.

So Paul tells them, “We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

Death is real. Death is coming for every single one of us. That is the message of Ash Wednesday. And we do well to acknowledge it, to own it, to accept it, to believe it. But death has no power. Christ has won the victory. And that is the message of Easter, the great good news we will celebrate at the end of these forty days.

If death were not real, then Easter wouldn’t matter. But because Easter is real, because resurrection is real, then death does not matter.

On this Ash Wednesday, the oil of baptism binds the ashes of mortality. The cross of new life sustains and makes possible the dark reminder of death. We can walk out of here today and take a wet wipe at the back of the church and remove every mark of ash from our foreheads, and still -- that other cross ... the cross of our baptism, the cross of life ... can never, never, never be erased. Yes, we are dust and to dust we shall return. But better than that, bigger than that, we are marked as Christ’s own forever.

And that’s why we should not face this annual reminder of our mortality with denial. No, not with denial. Not with doubt. Not with dread or with depression. Instead, we should face that inevitable, inexorable death with defiance, and dare it to act as though it had any real power over us.

And if we do that, faithfully, honestly, habitually, day in and day out, not only in the Lenten days ahead, but also on into all the weeks and months and years that follow -- if we do that, then when that day, that final day, arrives we will be able to shout – with defiance and with joy -- the words from our burial liturgy:

“All of us go down to the dust, yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!”