

Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
2 Cor 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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There are certain times when the veil between life and death seems especially thin, and this is one of those times for me... maybe not just me. There has been so much death. Death in Ukraine. Death on the streets of Portland. Death from a virus we barely knew about two years ago. Death bruising the human family.

And some of us have been touched very closely by the deaths of people we care about. This year I've had reason to be present at quite a few deathbeds, including those of my own mother and father – and that is something that changes you. I counted it a deep privilege, a blessing, to accompany my parents in that way, but it was also hard. My dad and mom died just a few days apart, and I came away from that experience a bit shaken, in a kind of fog. There were days I literally went around looking at people I would meet and wondering: *How does anybody even stay alive?* Death seemed so powerful. Life seemed so fragile.

Yet for all the sadness and loss that has come with this experience, there are also gifts, there are always gifts if we look for them. It is valuable to realize how fragile life can be. And valuable to be made aware of what a miracle it is to be alive, to *still be alive*, to be granted the blessing of taking a breath each morning and getting out of bed to greet a new day. It is valuable to be shaken just enough that now I hold life more precious than I did before, in ways I can't quite articulate just yet. I know in a personal way that earthly life is finite. We only have so many years to live, and we are called to make them count.

Ash Wednesday is a day when the veil between life and death seems especially thin. We come to worship, a place where we usually look for renewal and new life, and we hear these words, *"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."* We receive the mark of ashes on our foreheads – an ancient sign of grief and mourning. Also the ancient sign of repentance, humility before God, the willingness to change.

This ritual calls us to confront our mortality. To realize that one day our time on earth will end. And it poses the question: *What will you do with the years you have left?*

Ash Wednesday is not meant to bring us down. It is meant to clarify our vision. We are meant to see that all of life is a gift from God, that we come from God and we will return to God one day.

We are meant to examine the purpose of each day we live. To live with intention rather than just catapulting through the months and years. In the ritual of confession we are invited to realize there are some paths we follow that are just... dead ends.

Jesus advises: *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*

It's a loving warning that some of the things we have pursued with great energy are not the things that last. They are a waste of our life force and worse, destructive to us and others and the earth. Ash Wednesday gives us the blessed opportunity to grieve past mistakes and turn again to God, *who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

God abounds in love that calls us forward to a more generative and purposeful life. A life that imitates Christ and walks as best we can in the path Christ has laid out for us: the path of self-giving love, compassion, justice-seeking courage, and joy that recognizes and appreciates God's gifts. A life where we do our best to be vessels for the great love God infuses in us. A life not deterred or sidetracked by sadness or discouragement or feelings of inadequacy or lack of success or worrying we can't make a difference. We offer all this grief to God today, and we ask simply that in the future our actions and attitudes may better convey God's gracious presence, that we may more often be a light shining in dark places.

Last week, one blustery morning, I was in my car just pulling away from the curb when I noticed something new on our next-door neighbors' front porch. It was a huge bouquet of shiny pink balloons, all different shades of pink, all different sizes, bouncing and bobbing in the morning breeze. The sunlight glinted off them so that they seemed to be alive. It was the signal we'd been waiting for – this young couple's baby girl had been born! My heart lifted instantly. Driving to work I just couldn't stop smiling. That evening I went right out and bought a big bouquet of flowers – pink flowers – and a card, and the instant I got home I talked Aaron into going next door with me. I couldn't help it, I was so excited, I just wanted to touch that joy. Of course we wore our masks and stayed on the front porch, but we did get to catch a precious glimpse the round face of that sweet baby girl, wrapped in a blanket in the arms of her grandma. Grandma couldn't stop smiling either.

It just felt like a miracle to me, especially in the midst of these hard days. And of course it is. All of life is a miracle. A gift from God. A finite span to get to know this beautiful, wounded earth and its creatures. A finite span of years to make some kind of mark, make a contribution. A finite span to practice love and forgiveness and generosity and healing and faith. May we make the most of it, to God's glory. Amen.