

Ash Wednesday
February 26, 2020
Text: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

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Helen lived in New York City, and even in her mid-nineties, the way friends described her suggested a force of nature. She was loud and brash, with a lot of energy and a lot of self-confidence. She was definitely the kind of person who made an impression on others. But as she was closing in on 100, some nagging health problems began to bother her. She began to feel tired, and wanted to talk with her family about how she wanted to approach her final days. But her daughter, Zoe, wouldn't even permit the conversation. She was refused to accept that her mother could ever die.

One time, Helen asked her rabbi to tell her daughter that her mother wasn't going to live forever. The daughter refused to listen. She said, "She's going to be here forever! I can't talk about this. Her mother said, "Zoe, grow up." But Zoe simply wouldn't accept her mother's mortality. And she wouldn't allow her mom to talk her way through some of the difficult things that she needed to express.

Over the months that her mother was declining, Zoe had other things to do and places to go. Even when the nursing home started giving Helen morphine, Zoe kept insisting her mother would bounce back. Later, she said that she knew deep down that her mother wasn't going to recover, but she just didn't want to admit it. Now, she says, she's taking her mother's death really hard. ("She Is 96 and Does Not Fear Death. But Do Her Children?" *New York Times*, January 5, 2020) It seems so tremendously sad to me—that Zoe should be so paralyzed by fear, and that fear impacted both Zoe and her mother, making their relationship less than it could have been at the end of Helen's life. It prevented Helen from being able to say things she needed to say in the months before her death.

And that's what makes today such an important day, such a beautiful day—even with these ashes smeared in a big, black cross on our foreheads. On Ash Wednesday, we are invited to reflect on our mortality, to recognize that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Like Helen's daughter, Zoe, we might resist that attention to our mortality—unless we understand that in that attention is the possibility of tremendous freedom. We have this gift of life—it is beautiful and confusing. It is wonderful and challenging and heartbreaking. And life is a temporary gift. It is given to us for a time, and then we release it. We return it to God our Creator, for God to hold, and we are freed from the fear that comes from imagining that death simply erases us, that death renders everything null and void. We belong to our Creator, who holds our little span of time in the eternity of God's embrace.

Ash Wednesday calls us to turn to God with all our heart. Turn to the One who loves you, who will always hold you in love, through all of this life, and beyond, even after we have returned this temporary gift into God's care. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Oh, to be known and loved like that, by our Creator, who looks on us with such grace and forgiveness. It means that we cannot be simply erased, because God sees us and

knows us and loves us. We live, then, with a kind of lightness and joy. Even though life brings its share of pain and sorrow to everyone, this too shall pass. But God's love, God's compassionate embrace, is eternal.

Today, Ash Wednesday, is really about being unburdened—unburdened of the fear that death renders everything meaningless, that life is all just nothing. Today is about being unburdened of the worry and tightness that comes from living under such a cloud of fear, a cloud that makes life small. Even as we remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return, we also remember to thank to God for today, and for this amazing gift of life, and most of all to remember that in our relationship with our Creator, we are beloved children who are held forever in God's compassionate embrace. Thanks be to God. Amen.