

Ash Wednesday C (2/10/2016)

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 51:1-17

[2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10]

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-20

Life is short. We have all kinds of distractions from that fact, not the least of which is our own agenda, the long-term plan we have designed to ensure our own success and happiness. But, the simple fact is that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Ashes remind us of how quickly our time slips away, and force us to decide what really matters. Our wastefulness, our self-centeredness, our sin violate the gift of life, and Lent is a good time to be real about that. Nevertheless, we are forever held in the steadfast love and abundant mercy of God.

Recently, we have grieved the deaths of several beloved friends, family members, and sisters and brothers in Christ. Our congregation has funeral services scheduled for three out of four Saturdays in February. Not to mention, many of us are afflicted by persistent illnesses, and many others simply by weariness. Maybe it's that late winter has a way of wearing on us like no other time of year. Or, maybe it's just a stage in the natural pattern of life and death. Either way, as Lent begins this year, we are especially mindful of our mortality, and the mortality of our loved ones and neighbors.

It's no accident that Ash Wednesday calls this mortality to our attention.

I read to you from a liturgical guide to Lent:

[Ben Stewart, "Ash Wednesday: Understanding the Day," *Worship Guidebook for Lent and the Three Days*, pp.18-19]

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Dear church, life is short. We have all kinds of distractions from that fact, not the least of which is our own

agenda, the long-term plan we have designed to ensure our own success and happiness. But, the simple fact is that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Ashes remind us of how quickly our time slips away, and force us to decide what really matters.

How do you want to be remembered at your funeral? That's a helpful way to frame your Lenten journey. The fragility of life has a way of focusing our attention on what a truly faithful, full life looks like, and sheds light on all the ways we fall short. Our wastefulness, our self-centeredness, our sin violate the gift of life, and Lent is a good time to be real about that. So, we repent. We stop making excuses, and lay bare all that we need God to clear away from our lives. We implore God to renew our hearts and our spirits so that we can renew our faith, hope, and love, treasures worth accumulating.

But, above all, we remember who God is. Again, I read:

[Ben Stewart, "Ash Wednesday: Understanding the Day," *Worship Guidebook for Lent and the Three Days*, p.20]

You are dust, and to dust you shall return. All you have is this life, these people, this Earth. Yet, **you are forever held in the steadfast love and abundant mercy of God. In the season leading up to Easter, recall the promise of baptism, that in dying with Christ we also rise to new life with him. So, we can return to the Lord our God with trust, for God is gracious and merciful, and will restore to us the joy of salvation, in this short life and in the blessed rest of everlasting peace.**