

Today on Ash Wednesday we begin our forty-day journey toward Easter with a day dedicated to fasting and repentance.

We will mark our foreheads with dust,
As we acknowledge that we die and return to the earth.

Using ashes as a sign of repentance is an ancient practice,
often mentioned in the Bible.¹

The early Christians adopted the use of ashes
from Jewish practice as an external mark of penitence.

We are called to deny ourselves in some way, shape, or form,
By giving up some convenience, something that we like, or enjoy,
To remind ourselves of what Jesus gave up,
He was God after all,
Yet took on human form,
To identify with us humans,
The creator becoming part of the creation,
Even to the point of dying,
Even to the point of dying on a cross.

I remember explaining the concept of giving something up for Lent to my three-grade school boys,

I hoped that they would find some meaning,
Even at their young ages.

My middle son thought about it a bit, and then offered to give up vegetables for Lent.

My youngest son chimed in and said that he wanted to give up wearing clothes for Lent.

My teaching moment was not quite what I had hoped it would be. . .

* * *

Today when we mark our foreheads with dust. We acknowledge that we die and return to the earth.

Genesis tells us that we are dirtlings, made from the dirt which is the literal translation of the word *a-dam*. Humans, formed from the humus.

¹ e.g., Jonah 3:5-9; Job 42:6; Jeremiah 6:26; Matthew 11:21

At the same time, the dust traces the life-giving cross indelibly marked on our foreheads at baptism.

While we journey through Lent to return to God,
we know that have already been reconciled to God through Christ.
So we humbly pray for God to make our hearts clean,
and aware of the salvation God has granted in Christ.
And we remember our baptismal call,
so that we more intentionally
bear the fruits of mercy and justice in the world.²

My partner Anna and I have been watching a very compelling HBO show recently called “Six Feet Under” which originally aired in 2001.

I can honestly recommend it as the most Ash Wednesday show ever created.

The show centers on the Fisher family, who owns and operates a funeral home in Los Angeles. As one might expect, it has a lot of dark humor as it looks at death and how people cope with death, or not.

In fact, each episode begins with the death of someone, and follows the storyline through of how friends and families deal with the loss of a loved one.

It asks a lot of big, deep, existential questions, more than any show I’ve ever watched. One of the two brothers is also a deacon at his church and so there is significant religious content as well, which is kinda surprising for a critically acclaimed series.

In one episode, a young woman who has just lost her beloved aunt, asks the question I think we all have asked:

“Why do people have to die?”

Nate, one of the funeral directors, who also recently lost his own father, responds:

“To make life important.

None of us know how long we’ve got,

which is why we have to make each day matter.”

We don’t have forever.

Singer-songwriter Jason Isbell in his song “If We Were Vampires” puts it this way:

Maybe time running out is a gift

I’ll work hard 'til the end of my shift

And give you every second I can find

You know the old saying that

“Nothing is certain but death and taxes.”

However, some people cheat on their taxes.

No one cheats death.

² Sundays & Seasons

* * *

So what are we to do with the time we have to make it meaningful? Well, here are two things that our text tells us:

First, be humble.

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

Second, don't have too much stuff.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth . . .”

Why not, you ask?

Because, one of the most succinct true statements in all of Scripture:

“where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Maybe this Lent, you take an accounting of your treasure. Is it treasure? Is it stuff? Are you using it? Could it help others? If so, of course, Alley Shoppe is open Mondays and Tuesdays from 10-12 and happy to help you redistribute your wealth.

Of course, the hope is that habits formed will last longer than 40 days. My youngest son did not become a nudist. But in college, he did give up meat for lent. At 26, he's still a vegetarian. May our own humility and decluttering anti-materialism last long after the 40 days too.

* * *

Last year I shared a quote from Rachel Held Evans, and it's worth sharing again. Rachel was a writer, blogger, and advocate for a church that was

more inclusive,

more compassionate,

more welcoming,

a church that lived a more gracious gospel,

She confronted the dysfunction, abuses, inconsistencies, and oppression of minorities in American evangelicalism. She was popular with the outsiders, the struggling, the marginalized, and reviled by the gatekeepers, the powerful, and the exclusionary. She died tragically too young, at 37, leaving behind a loving husband, a three-year-old and one-year-old.

Her last blog post, from Ash Wednesday, 2019, was eerily prophetic about her life, and the appropriate reminder for us on Ash Wednesday, 2024:

“It strikes me today that the liturgy of Ash Wednesday teaches something that nearly everyone can agree on.

Whether you are part of a church or not, whether you believe today or you doubt, whether you are a Christian or an atheist or an agnostic or a so-called “none” (whose faith experiences far transcend the limits of that label), you know this truth deep in your bones:

‘Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.’

Death is a part of life.

My prayer for you this season is that you make time to celebrate that reality, and to grieve that reality and that you will know you are not alone.”

My prayer for us this season is that we follow Jesus’s way of humility,
practicing our righteousness privately,
giving alms such that our
 left-hand doesn’t know what our right hand is doing,
And that we build up treasures in heaven,
 where moth and rust and thieves cannot touch
 our works done with love
 in this short life that we have.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.”

Amen.