

Grace, Peace and Mercy are yours

Ash Wednesday has got to be one of the weirdest moments of our church calendar. This is one that I find pretty difficult to explain to my friends who don't do church. "Emily, why are you going to church on a Wednesday" It's a special festival that marks the beginning of a new season in the church year. Oh, what does that entail? Not much, we're going to confess our own sinfulness, rub ashes into our foreheads and talk about death...

slow
through
here

It does sound awfully morbid on the surface. Death isn't something we talk about, it is not a subject for polite conversation, and when we must deal with it, we do so hastily and in hushed tones. In some ways I think, we live in a death denying culture. We pretend that with the right combination of **church**, yoga, meditation, and organic foods we might actually go on living forever. We are bombarded with anti-aging products and elective procedures promising to preserve us in an eternally youthful state. And that barely scratches the surface. We live in a culture that propagates the myth that if we are strong enough, careful enough, smart enough, we can somehow outwit, cheat, outlast or escape the fate that ultimately comes to all human beings.

slow

define

quickly

In this context, being confronted with my own mortality is not depressing, it is actually rather refreshing.

slow, deliberate

And it's refreshing because it is the Truth. This is why I have a certain fondness for Ash Wednesday. Because we, and Christians around the world do a brave and necessary thing today. We gather to tell one another that we are dust and to dust we will return. We remind ourselves and each other that we are going to die.

It's sort of like blurring out the family secret at the reunion that everyone already knows but no one is willing to tell. Once it's out there, you can finally exhale.

Once the truth of our mortality is out there, it releases us from trying to pretend like death is not inevitable. We can finally say it: we are not immortal. We cannot manage this unavoidable outcome. We cannot control it. We are not ultimately in control. God is. And that is good news. That's the truth.

My pastor back home uses this image to illustrate the meaning of Ash Wednesday. If your life is a string of unknown length with your baptism on one end and your funeral on the other, then Ash Wednesday is like pinching the string in the middle so that the two ends meet. It is as though the water of your baptism and the earth of your funeral meet in the ashen cross on your forehead and in that meeting we are reminded of God's promises ~~once more~~. We are reminded that there is something beyond the death we proclaim, **that there is more**. We

use your hands!

make this clear

touch the ash - show them your head!

clear, slow

are reminded that we are claimed by an eternal divinity that transcends our mortal reality. That is God's promise to us; that death will not, cannot, does not have the final word. God does. LIFE does.

cont to 5

I find great hope in Ash Wednesday. In telling the truth that I am going to die someday, I create just enough space in my life to stop fighting for control, stop trying to manage that which isn't mine to handle and instead allow God to be God for me. At the end of the day I think that's all any of us actually need. Not immortality, not perfection. We just need God to be God for us.

And the good news is that God is for us. We believe that death does not get the last word because we know that ultimately it is not death that claims us-it is God. We know that God is both our origin and our destination. We come from God and to God we will return, and nothing, not our sin or brokenness, not even death itself can alter that fact. That is the simple and astonishing truth.

But my goodness, there is so much that gets in the way of remembering that. Maybe that is why we need Lent. Maybe we need a season that is ^{not} actually ~~not~~ about proving ourselves worthy of God's love or punishing ourselves for being human, but one that invites us to strip away all the delusion, the anesthesia, the

THIS awesome God

noise that prevent us from ~~seeing~~ and resting in this relationship with the God of hope and promise, the God that's got us. Maybe Lent is an opportunity to cut through the lies of a death denying culture to seek after the sometimes difficult truth that it is not all up to us. That we belong eternally to the God in whom we have our being. **Lent is an opportunity to strip away anything that keeps you from the truth that ^{you} we were loved before this life and ^{you} we will be loved after this life and ^{you} we are loved by Almighty God every day in between.**

This God delights in the truth of who you are, that you have been marked with the cross and sealed with the Spirit/ that you are a sinner of God's own redeeming. This God who was God for Jacob and Moses and Mary Magdalene and Peter, is also God for you. So as you receive ashes on your forehead and hear that you are dust and to dust you shall return, know that it is true. Let that truth set you free and give you hope. Know that God's got you. **She's got you.**

use your hands open palm

Amen.