

ASH WEDNESDAY | FEBRUARY 22, 2023

JOEL 2:1-2, 12-17 | PSALM 51:1-17 | 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20B-6:10 | MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21

The season of Lent is all about baptism. In the early church, when people were baptized at the Easter vigil, it was the final stretch of their formation and catechesis. So Lent was a time of intense self-examination and repentance, prayer and fasting, sacrificial giving and works of love, the so-called “disciplines” that we’ll hear of later tonight.

Our Ash Wednesday commemorations lose the plot when we forget that baptismal focus. Ash Wednesday is not just about remembering our own deaths. It’s remembering that, in our baptisms, we have died and been raised with Christ. So in this season of Lent, we prepare for our death and resurrection in Christ.

Our culture has a kind of cognitive dissonance when it comes to death. On the one hand, we live with constant reminders of death. When we watch the news, we see images of bodies buried under rubble or being abused by people meant to protect us or killed seemingly at random. There is so much death that at least one of the survivors in last week’s shooting at Michigan State had previously survived the shooting at Oxford High School the previous fall. And yet, in other ways we live as if we will never die, as if the rules of life don’t really apply to us. That we really can be in five places at once. That there is always more room on our plate. That there will always be a tomorrow. That we always have more time to fix things.

When we remember our mortality on Ash Wednesday, that we are dust and to dust we shall return, it’s the latter that we’re focusing on. We are remembering that we are not the Creator, we are creatures. Our lives are limited.

There are a few ways to deal with those limitations. One is to try to extend our life as far as we can. Think cryogenic freezing or, in the case of one venture capitalist, injecting ourselves with the blood of young people. Some speculate that we could live a hundred and fifty years. But it’s unclear exactly what we would do with the extra decades.

Another possibility is to cram as much life into our years as we can. To live harder. To maximize every waking moment. As Kerouac put it in *On the Road*, to “burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars.” But even that isn’t much help. Roman candles may burn hot, but they also burn out.

A third, more counterintuitive way to deal with our mortality is trust. After all, being mortal means that we cannot do everything. We cannot be everywhere. We cannot solve everything. So at the end of our lives, at the end of our efforts, at the end of our stories, we need to trust that other people are carrying on the work that was handed onto us. That God is capable of working in lives and experiences distinct from our own. That God’s mission of reconciling creation involves each of us, but it does not begin and end in us.

In *The Irony of American History*, Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way, “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.”¹ To be saved by hope does not mean that we live forever. (Reinhold Niebuhr is dead.) It simply

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 63.

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means that we trust that God's action extends beyond the horizons of our own lives. And instead of our mortality condemning us to indifference or inaction or quietism because of our own shortcomings, our mortality draws our attention to the work of God in our neighbors and our descendants.

This is part of what it means to be church together. Out in the narthex, we have a list of charter members from when this congregation was founded. They took their time, their resources, their effort, their service, and made their reverent best guess about how to live as God's people. And gradually, as time went on, they handed this community over to us. Until now, when the vast majority of people on the wall out there are now dead.

And so what do we do? We invest our time, our resources, our effort, our service, and make our reverent best guess at how to live as God's people. And we do that recognizing that we are always passing this community on to those who will come after us.

So we are not a community that is saved by our talents or efforts or abilities or outcomes. (If we are, God help us.) We are a community that is saved by something outside of itself. We are a community that is saved by hope.

This is part of what today's epistle reading is about. At the beginning of this reading, St. Paul encourages the church in Corinth not to accept the grace of God "in vain." To do something "in vain" means to do it for nothing. Think of shoveling the street right before the plow drives through. You may as well have done nothing. So often in our lives, we think that unless we finish something, unless it gets all wrapped up with a neat bow on it, unless we get what we need for closure, it was all in vain.

But when St. Paul uses that phrase, he means something else. Doing something in vain isn't about not finishing. It's about not starting. It's about not trying. It's about not handing something on to someone else. That's why St. Paul says that the day of salvation can't be put off until tomorrow. But the day of salvation is "now." Because even if our efforts can't make life on earth just the way it is in heaven, there is no obstacle keeping us from living and serving and working together as God's people today.

In a few minutes, you'll come forward, and I'll impose ashes on your forehead. Those ashes are a sign that we are limited. We are finite. We are creatures. But pay attention to how I place those ashes on your head. You are marked with a cross. The same mark that is sealed on us with the gift of the Holy Spirit in our baptisms. The ashes remind us that we are limited, finite creatures. But the cross reminds us that we have been joined to the death and resurrection of Christ. And as part of the body of Christ, we are grafted into a movement of God that exceeds the span of our days.

We are not saved by our own efforts, our own striving, or even our own lives. They are dust and to dust they shall return. But in the body of Christ, crucified and risen, we are saved by hope.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor