



ASH WEDNESDAY SERMON

LIFE IS SHORT

We gather each year on Ash Wednesday in churches and also out on our streets for this strange and distinctive Christian custom, the imposition of ashes. Oddly, we do the very thing Jesus tells us in the Gospel reading not to do. Instead of praying in secret and washing our faces clean of this sign, we bear it on our brows, most of us, as we go out, bear it afterwards for all to see. I've never really understood this juxtaposition. For me it rests in the realm of paradox and ambiguity that graces our faith tradition - and I'll leave it there.

But along with the sign, we bear the words, hearing them, carrying them with us, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." These are stark, truthful words. The poet, Lisel Mueller refers to mortality as "the hard dry smack of death against the glass." These words remind us from where we've come, and where we're going - ashes to ashes, dust to dust. We're born into this world, and we will die. It's an irrefutable fact, and yet, for some, one of the hardest things to imagine, let alone accept. That we will die.

As one who imposes ashes, I find it so poignant, and beautiful and sad, all at once. The perfect face of a small child looks up trustingly, wide-eyed as I mark a black cross on her innocent forehead. The wrinkled face of an old person, one who has weathered so many years of life's glories and storms looks up as well, and I always think each of us must be wondering if this will be his or her last time. Poignant, and beautiful, and sad.

On this day we stop, if only for this moment, or for this hour to just be with the fact of our mortality, to remember - yes, to remember that we are dust.

But there is another reminder of our mortality that we hear much more often. It's that blessing, the one so many of you tell me is meaningful, the one that begins, "Life is short." We hear it on many Sundays; we hear it at funerals; I've even used it at weddings. A Jewish friend of mine uses it every year at the Thanksgiving dinner table.

In case you're not familiar with it, the blessing comes to us from the 19th century Swiss philosopher, Henri Amiel and goes like this: "Life is short and we do not have too much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So be swift to love, and make haste to be kind." That's where Amiel ended it - after all, he was a philosopher and not a priest. And so in churches, we've added the rest, "And may the blessing of the one who made us and loves us and goes before us be upon you this day and always," and then, in many cases, the Trinitarian ending, "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

continued

DATE

Epiphany 3
Wed., Feb. 26, 2020

PREACHER

The Rev. Susan Flanders

The blessing urges us, because of the very shortness of life, to use it well, to use life for its highest purposes, to use our time to love and to be kind.

It is, in this one brief kernel, a short reminder of what the prophet Isaiah has to say in our first reading. He makes a long and sweeping condemnation of fasting and penitence that are superficial and hypocritical and self-serving. He presents God as mocking people who offer such piety. Then Isaiah offers a long and sweeping vision of what kind of fasting and penitence are acceptable to God. This fast is one that loses the bonds of injustice; it's one in which we share wealth, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked. We become repairers of the breach; we bridge the gap between the rich and the poor the haves and the have-nots. We need to hear all of this today and to be reminded of the many ways in which we fall short and miss the mark of what we could be at our best. And we need to hear it against the backdrop of the imposition of ashes, the unchanging reality of death. How and where might we turn in repentance? And if not now, when? Amiel's blessing, which we hear so often throughout the year, meshes well with this special day of penitence and acknowledgement of our mortality. It's a very short reminder indeed of Isaiah's urgent call. Loving and being kind should be our response to the world's injustice, our response to God's love.

We do not have too much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So be swift to love, and make haste to be kind. Life is short, remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. We return to the heart of the matter on this day as we begin Lent. May our observance of this season be holy and faithful and true. Amen.