

Sermon for Ash Wednesday
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“So teach us to number our days that we apply our hearts to wisdom”
Psalm 90:12

In the Ash Wednesday liturgy we are reminded that we are formed out of the dust of the earth and that unto that dust we shall return. Even when we live our lives in faith, trusting God each and every day, we cannot know the exact hour of our death. One day, your life and mine will end. That is not an idle speculation, but a truth we cannot avoid.

It is possible, of course, to live much of our lives blissfully unaware of our own mortality, that is, until someone close to us dies and we are harshly reminded of our own finitude. We live in a culture that, for the most part, acts as if life goes on and on forever. In his Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker argues that the fear of death is the mainspring of human activity. The rush of our activity is the very mechanism that we employ to deny the reality of our own mortality.

A number of years ago when I was reading an academic book on semiotics, the philosophical study of signs and their meanings, an unexpected quote from the French literary theorist Roland Barthes emerged from the pages and as it were, slapped me on the face. In a lecture he gave in 1978, Barthes remarked:

The middle of my life is nothing other than the moment when I discover death as real. And then all of a sudden is produced this evidence, on the one hand, that I no longer have time to try several lives. I have to choose my last life, my new life, my *vita nuova*; and on the other hand, I must leave this tenebrous state where the wear and tear of repeated work and mourning have conducted me.

Barthes' words spoke to me in a number of ways. The first was to remind me that I am middle-aged. To date, I have lived the life of parish priest and professor and, like most people I know, still wonder what it might be like to try a completely different profession. When I was young, I could

dream of all my possible futures; now in “middle age” I must endeavor to live the life I now have--the only life I have--to its fullest.

Secondly, it brought to mind the focus that we Christians place on the suffering and death of Jesus during the season of Lent, particularly during Holy Week. Many Christians, I suspect, find it difficult to attend church services on Good Friday, because attending would remind them of the very thing they work so actively to forget, namely, their own finitude and the finitude of those they love.

Third, I realized how important is it to take time to reflect on the life we now are living. When we purposely remind ourselves of our own mortality, it helps us to become better stewards of the life that we have been given. Because we have a limited life on this earth, we must learn, as the psalmist says, “to number our days,” striving each day to live the best life that we can with what we have been given.

Ashes are imposed on us both as a reminder of our mortality and as a sign of our repentance—our *metanoia*—our return to God. They are not meant to be the outward signs of piety that Jesus condemns in our gospel reading today. The ashes are for you, to remind you that you need to repent—that is “turn your mind” and heart back to God. Sin, by its very nature, separates us from God and from one another. Covering one’s self with ashes was an ancient Hebrew way of announcing one’s sorrow at the person or persons that one had become, and an appeal to God to forgive us and to reconcile us to God and to one another. The ashes imposed on us today are for us, to remind us that we need to turn our hearts and minds back to God.

Medieval monks often engaged in a spiritual practice that has all but been forgotten—the *momento mori*—the meditation on one’s own death. This was not understood to be in any ways morose, but as a solemn reminder to spend our days wisely.

The things we do in Lent—whether we deny ourselves some things or whether we add certain spiritual disciplines and practices—are all done, as Philip Apol reminds us, “not to change the world; they are first to change us, to connect us back to life, and to help us make life-giving connections.”

The good news of the gospel is that death is not our final end. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead inaugurates the possibility of both a *vita nuova*, a new life, in the present and of eternal life with God in our future. St. Paul recognized this when he wrote, “...If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”(2 Cor. 5:17).

This Lent, I urge you to claim the new life that God has in store for you and endeavor to live the life that God has given you to the fullest. As St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “Awake O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light” (Eph. 5: 14) and life.