

“Dying to Live”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
Ash Wednesday – 10 February 2016
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 103:8-14; II Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Once a year, just once a year, we gather in worship to reflect on the inescapable reality that each of us, and everyone we know, will someday die. We receive on our foreheads a cross of ashes, a symbol of our mortality, and hear the stark, distressing words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This unpleasant experience brings to the forefront of our minds an undeniable fact about human existence, a fact we prefer to ignore. Yet pausing to focus on the inevitability of death raises a greater awareness about how precious life really is, how blessed we are that God gives us this opportunity, and how we need to approach life with sacred intention.

However, Ash Wednesday involves more than a mere reminder of that single moment in time called death. God also summons us, in this season of Lent, to focus with greater intensity on sin and how we might resist it and repent of it. Sin poses a terrible threat to our spiritual well-being. Left unchecked, sin will kill the soul, a truth that presents us with a much greater danger than physical death.

Yet unlike the body, whose demise we cannot prevent, God grants us power to preserve our souls by dying daily to sin through sincere repentance, which facilitates our reception of God’s forgiveness and the everlasting life it bestows. As the Psalmist reveals, “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us. For he himself knows whereof we are made; he remembers that we are but dust.”

Likewise, the prophet Joel spoke to a people who went sinned badly, but in the midst of his horrific predictions of doom, Joel offered a message of mercy. “Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.” Despite their persistent betrayal of God’s covenant, despite their idolatry and injustice and indulgence, God stood ready to rescue His people from sin, and God still stands ready to save us, because God loves us, no matter what.

So on a day when we confront the dread of death, we also come to celebrate. We come to celebrate a promise that fosters hope. Our souls, the essence of who we are, need not perish, but can endure forever, if we pursue the practices embodied in Jesus Christ our Lord, and the principal pattern Jesus set forth, in word and deed, deals with humble and self-sacrificial love, and nothing reveals how this works better than the cross.

As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “For our sake [God] made [Jesus] to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” In other words, on the cross, Jesus removed our sins and took them upon himself to open an avenue of forgiveness and reconciliation for us with God. How this works, exactly, remains a topic of unceasing theological debate. Ultimately, it is a mystery, but all we need to know is that it does work: our sin, deadly to the soul, is what killed Jesus on the cross. He died so that we might live and be free. To say that we are obligated is a gross understatement, and our faithful response, motivated by gratitude and joy, requires a daily dying to sin through humble sacrifice.

Now how that plays out precisely for each person varies, but a life of penitent faith and forgiveness does feature some facets consistent for everyone. First, sacrifice involves suffering. We tend to think that the Christian life protects us from suffering, and this is true for certain kinds of suffering. God liberates us from the pain of enslavement to sin, but the freedom we’re

given comes with responsibilities, and responding to God's love often puts us at odds with forces in the world that oppose God.

Paul points that out that "as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonment, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger." We probably won't experience most of the extreme situations that Paul, in his missionary fervor, endured, like riots and beatings and imprisonment, but we need to be prepared for the occasional sleepless night as we keep vigil with God, as well as labors of love we call ministry.

Second, sacrifice involves surrendering our pride. Jesus emphasized this when he warned that our provision for the poor, our prayers, and our penitent fasting needs to be done secretly, not publicly. Taken at face value, this means that much of what we're doing today is wrong. We join now for public prayer, and each of us will leave this place with a smear of ash that signifies our desire to repent. However, to understand what Jesus really means requires attention to context, and in particular to a single word he used, "hypocrite."

Through the course of his ministry, Jesus engaged in conflict with a group of religious elites for whom outward shows of piety proved more important than inward transformation. Jesus wants us to do the right things for the right reasons. What we show on the outside needs to correspond to the hard work we're doing on the inside, spiritually. Our motives need to be clear and sincere; our hearts humble and eager to serve. If we wear our ashes to receive public praise, then it would be better for us to not receive them at all, or at least to wipe them off after worship. However, that dark smudge on our foreheads can offer the opportunity to witness as well.

I grew up Methodist, and we didn't observe Ash Wednesday. In college, I became an Episcopalian and remember vividly the first time I received the imposition of ashes. I didn't

wipe away the stain, and on returning to campus, several people unfamiliar with the practice asked, “What on your forehead?” I explained what it meant, as best I could, which I hope served – and based on their favorable response, did serve – as a witness to the commitment it takes to be in covenant with God and how that commitment can take us to some weird, counter-cultural places.

Finally, sacrifice involves giving up our lust for life. We often do this symbolically during Lent by giving up something we enjoy, like chocolate or TV, or doing something new that’s wholesome, like meditating or exercising each day. Now Jesus wants us to live enthusiastically, but sometimes our enthusiasm warps into sin. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth . . . but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” If we prioritize anything above God, we sin. We need to guard against greed for money, power, position, even security. We need to resist anxiety for the future by living in the present moment of God’s peace, and we can live in God’s peace if we accept God’s guidance obediently, if we accept the truth that we rely on God alone, not our own designs and devices.

We can make these holy sacrifices that lead us to repentance, renewal, and reconciliation if keep life in perspective by remembering from time to time that “we are dust, and to dust we shall return.” Each of us will someday die. We cannot control that, but can make choices about what happens between now and then. Each of us will die, but as momentous as this experience is, it is insignificant in comparison with the daily dying to sin that facilitates a faithful Christian life. To really live in the way God wants, we have to die: persistently, humbly, and intentionally. For in dying, we truly live, finding new and everlasting life given to us by Jesus on the cross. Amen.

