

The Specter of Death All Around

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:12-19 2 Cor.5:20b-6:10 Mt.6:1-6

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This Ash Wednesday comes to us in a way that is more poignant than it has likely every been in our lives before. Why do I say that? Because the specter of death looms so large around us. That specter has been building for more than a year now in this pandemic. 2.4 million deaths worldwide from Covid-19. Nearly 500,000 in the U.S alone. 30,000 in Florida. 368 in our county.

It's not JUST that we've been staying home and taking all kinds of precautions for so long in order to not get sick. It's the fact that we've been taking these precautions for so long in order NOT TO DIE.

Only it's gotten to the point when deaths have become so widespread, that many of us know people who HAVE died from this disease. Just weeks ago, a Holy Cross member died of Covid at 54. An elderly member died from it last November. Others of us have family who have now died from it. Still others have friends who have died from it. Nina told us recently she has neighbors on both sides of her who have died.

The specter of death IS all around us. Most of us can't get the vaccine fast enough. Yet so many of us have had such difficulty getting those shots. That struggle is a life and death struggle.

As if that isn't enough, two of our church members are dealing with other terminal illnesses as we come to this Ash Wednesday. Those members are sharply focused on getting things in order and living each remaining day to its fullest with those they love, while their families and friends and loved ones are already struggling with impending loss that just seems to come too soon.

I suppose it doesn't stop there either, for that matter. How many other people have we lost over the years? The loss of childhood friends and classmates. The loss of grandparents, aunts and uncles. The loss of parents and siblings. The losses just keep mounting up the longer we live.

The specter of death is all around, and the frailty of life is sharply in focus as we come to this Ash Wednesday. We are experiencing what the words of Psalm 90 so vividly lay out for us: "You turn us back to dust, [O Lord].... For all our days pass away...; our years come to an end like a sigh. The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away." (vv.3,9-10).

In many ways, Ash Wednesday would intentionally impress that upon us as we enter Lent each year. Ash Wednesday would intentionally emphasize that we are mortal and destined to die.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” That’s the pronouncement of mortality that we all receive each Ash Wednesday, just as God pronounced it upon our first parents, Adam and Eve. Just as Psalm 90 quoted it too.

But we generally do a pretty good job of ignoring that pronouncement. It’s just not something that we want to dwell on. We’ve always known that we are going to die. But we’ve not tended to live that way.

Instead we ignore our mortality and fill up our schedules well into the future as if there will always be a tomorrow. We busy ourselves and pile up all kinds of comforts around us so that we don’t have to think about any UNcomfortable notions about mortality. We wrap ourselves in the latest fads and fancies, and track all the politics of the day, and shake our heads at what this one says or that one does. We criticize how other generations are choosing to live, and get angry at this person or that person for cutting in front of us in traffic, or cutting in line at the grocery, or brusing our egos in who knows how many other ways. And we generally center the world around ourselves and our wants and our desires, all of which are really very transitory and devoid of much meaning – and we know it – but we want them any way. Just so that one day can follow another, and we can keep up our illusions that it will always be that way. And so we go merrily along, until....

Until we run smack into the specter of death. Maybe our death. Maybe the death of someone close. And suddenly all that we’ve been doing seems so meaningless. The illusion is exposed for what it is. And we find ourselves lacking.

Lacking in what? Lacking in what truly brings meaning into our lives – and even into our deaths. Only God can do that, you know. Only God, who breathes the breath of life into our dust-filled bodies and sets us on our life path. Only God, who shows us through the sacrifice of his Son how to live and love by loving us first.

Ash Wednesday would intentionally remind us of all that. Ash Wednesday would intentionally remind us of our mortality, lest we keep on surrounding ourselves with the meaningless and completely miss the meaningful. Ash Wednesday would remind us that only God is immortal, and were it not for him and his grace, we would surely be only a minor blip in the whole scope of time.

Into the midst of all this comes the prophet Joel with his clarion call:

“Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast.” Wake up from your illusions and repent, he essentially tell us. “Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful.”

Into the midst of all this comes the apostle Paul, entreating us “on behalf of Christ [to] be reconciled to God” and “not to accept the grace of God in vain.” In other words, seek the meaningful and true, “by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God.”

Into the midst of this comes Jesus, calling us to a piety that is seen, not in illusory display for others, but is seen by the Father who looks upon the heart and knows you intimately. What kind of piety? A piety that is filled with meaningfulness and love, love of God and love of neighbor. A piety of self-denial and fasting. A piety of prayer and meditation. A piety of almsgiving and tithing thankfully.

A piety that intentionally stores up treasures in the heart – a heart filled with God and the love of God. Treasures that look beyond the fleeting and transitory.

Treasures that help us live each day with a consciousness of God in our midst. Treasures that assure us that this same God is ready to receive us with grace and forgiveness at the end of our days. Treasures that lead us to the peace that passes all understanding, even as we stare in the face of death itself.

It's not fun having the specter of death all around us. But it is sobering. And we need that reminder of our own mortality to keep us from building up a meaningless life.

Follow the Lord Jesus into this Lenten season. Follow him all the way to the Good Friday cross. Follow him through HIS death and resurrection, so that you may know that your life and your death have been redeemed by God through this same Christ. You are precious in God's sight. Forever.2021