

Ash Wednesday Sermon

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by Intern Pastor Jory Mickelson

For most of us, death is the worst thing that can ever happen. Happen to us, or God forbid happened to those we love. Though we do not like to face this fact, we know that each of us—you, me, our spouses and children, even our grandchildren will eventually die. It's inevitable. It is part of the natural process of life, for everything on the planet from the mayfly who only lives for 24 hours to the bristlecone pine that may live up to 5,000 years. Death is built into the seeds of life. We don't want to face it.

But as Christians, we need to face the fact that death is at the heart of anything we want to say about our faith. The disciples believed Jesus was the Messiah, but they could not anticipate that the fulfillment of his mission and ministry on earth would result in his death. In fact, Christ's death on the cross is what most of the scriptures in the New Testament are about. What Christ's death means, what the consequences from his death and resurrection from the dead have done for us. We spend the whole week before Easter Sunday—from Palm Sunday to Good Friday devoted to remembering, retelling, and praying about the last days of Jesus' life. His arrest and condemnation by the government and religious authorities, his friends abandoning him, his humiliation and torture. Everything that leads to Christ's death on a cross in a garbage dump outside the city walls. Jesus died in a public execution with other criminals as a warning to people about what happens when you seek to interfere with those in power, religious or governmental. As Christians, we know even Jesus the Messiah's life ends in death.

We also know that isn't the whole story. We know about the resurrection. Yet how quickly we want to race past Good Friday and get to Easter Sunday. We want to talk about the Resurrection and the Life. Don't give me that depressing stuff, we say. Give me that Easter Joy and eternal life with God in Heaven. Amen.

But death is a part of the Christian story. It is part of our own human story as well. Ash Wednesday is the one time during the whole church year where you and I are reminded that we are the beloved creation of our God. And, AND that these bodies will fail us and eventually return to the earth. Ashes and dust. Reminded that our bodies are not the whole story. Reminded that our life on earth is not the sum total of our experience as followers of Christ. Yet most of us act like it is.

Ash Wednesday, the start of Lent, that 40 days before Easter Sunday is an opportunity for us to stop acting like it. To remind ourselves that our lives do not end when we die. That our story will include suffering and even death. Lent is about being a little uncomfortable. Lent is to wake us up to the fact that we, like Jesus, will experience the joys and the tears of this life.

Ash Wednesday, is also an opportunity to strengthen our faith. To open us up to more of God's grace. To experience a deeper compassion and love for those who suffer. Martin Luther said we don't need to observe Lent to be saved or sanctified because God has already done that work. But Luther saw Lent as a way for us to enter more deeply into the meaning of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection.

My question to each of us on this Ash Wednesday, as we enter the season of Lent, is this: how can you and I become a little uncomfortable? How will you and I more closely enter into Christ's suffering and death this season? What might you give up during Lent that you will miss? What about fasting or fasting from something you enjoy, like fasting from social media one day a week? Lent lets us really feel that impulse to reach for our phones and check Facebook. Lent helps us notice the discomfort.

Or what commitment might you make to a daily prayer during Lent? Is this a good time to restart that meditation or yoga practice you let go of? Have you ever thought about making a commitment to read a little of a Gospel each day? Or, what about finding a few new local charities and making a small donation each week of Lent? Five dollars isn't much, but the day you make your donation, you can also fast from that latte you would have bought with it. Feel the absences, the gaps, the irritations, the wanting.

All of these practices, can be a pain in the butt. A thorn in our side. Lenten practices can be one more thing to bug us each day. And that is kind of the point. These practices are small ways that we give up what we want and let God have a little more of our day. These practices that annoy us, make us long for the chocolate we gave up, or that we try to rush through the prayers we promised to day are a tiny kind suffering that help us to remember how much Christ suffered for us. These Lenten annoyances bring us closer to the crucified Jesus we so quickly want to look away from.

These discomforts and bumps in the road of our daily lives, these aches and irritations also help us to look to those around us who are still suffering. To really let us see our neighbors and community members who are in need and that we are called to love and serve. These Lenten practices help us to face the person in our lives or on the street we would rather avoid, turn away from, or ignore. Just like we would rather not think about death or dying. Just like we would rather have that beer we gave up.

I don't care what you do during this Lent. That is between you and God. But I do ask you and encourage you to do something. To give something you value up, or to try some new practice that will cause your soul to do a little stretching.

Because I promise you, it will carry you through Good Friday. And through that empty Saturday. Our little pains will make Easter Sunday all the more glorious for us. Our Lenten practices will remind us of that joyful life waiting for us beyond our own end.