

# WHO YOU ARE AND WHOSE YOU ARE

O God, our times are in your hands. You have made us. You are with us, now and until the end. Help us to see ourselves rightly. Help us to know that you've got us, and you haven't ever let us go and you never will. "You hate nothing that you have ever made and you forgive the sins of all who are penitent." You made us, You love us! You forgive us, and you hold us. Help us to know that. Help us to feel that. We pray these things in the name of Jesus, who conquered sin and death, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, who raised him from the grave. Amen.

When Christine asked me if I wanted to preach on Ash Wednesday, I said, "yes." I think I actually said something along the lines of "Oh, heck yeah!" But, I didn't want to seem overeager to preach on a day all about death, so I followed it up with, "that would be a wonderful opportunity, thank you." Honestly, I kind of like the sorts of "death" feast days in the church: the Ash Wednesdays, the All Souls Days, the All Saints Days. They're, you know, a little creepy and kinda fun! And I sort of like this stuff, not in a really dark way, where y'all need to worry about me, but in a way where I'm fascinated about our attitudes and actions around death and the idea of death.

I like THINKING about the fragility and finitude of this life, the preciousness of it, and the "it-actually-matters"-ness of our lives. But when I got down to writing about it, and trying to find something to say to y'all, it got... difficult. Ash Wednesday is TOUGH. Feeling, *really* feeling, the reality that we're gonna die, is not easy. It just isn't. But it *is* true. And THAT is the part of it that keeps me locked in, especially when I feel so tempted to jump straight to the resurrection, to Easter Sunday.

It feels silly to say in church, but I am a BIG fan of resurrection. This notion that something dead, like, truly, completely, actually dead, can be brought back to life, is amazing! That things which were not alive, can be made alive again! This is compelling stuff! It *really* gets me! But the thing is, we're not there yet. We've got 40 days to go.

Last summer, I read a book, that, when I told my mom about it, caused her to go, "huh....okay...." It's called "From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death" by an American Mortician named Caitlyn Doughty. The book chronicles her travels in Mexico, Indonesia, Japan, Bolivia, Spain, and a few other countries, to research the ways that people deal with and interact with death in these different cultures. She contrasts the way that Americans deal with death, moving the deceased to a funeral home or a mortuary as soon as possible, to, say, the people of Tana Toraja, a remote region off Indonesia, who keep departed loved-ones in their home for a year or more, cleaning and changing them, letting death be a normal part

of everyday life. They don't close their eyes off or shut their ears up from the reality of death; they interact with it, and they don't try to avoid it.

I'm not here to advocate for a full-scale, boycott of the Funeral Industry or to argue that we ought to keep dead bodies in our homes for a full calendar year. I AM interested in the idea that we, here in America, have an issue with death. I have an issue with death. Intellectually, I think this is all intensely fascinating, but the idea of me keeping a lifeless relative in my home for a year, or having a small window installed in the coffin of a loved-one, like some in Spain choose to do, or participating in an open-air cremation funeral pyre, a ritual practiced in some parts of India, honestly kind of freaks me out.

It's not that these cultures, these people, who have an up-close and personal interaction with death aren't taking death seriously, or that they're living in some state of denial that their loved one has actually died. I actually think it's the exact opposite. Having this close interaction with the fragility of life, staring death in the face, allows them to mourn and grieve in a real way, not just for their deceased loved one, but for themselves as well. They see them, touch them, clean them, clothe them, *hold them* and know that they are gone. Really, truly, gone... absent.

And that absence hurts, hurts more than we thought anything could hurt. Of course, it hurts! It hurts because we loved them, because we still do. There's a line from a Marvel show I watched a few months ago on Disney Plus, WandaVision, that still gets me, because I find it to be so true: "What is grief, but love persevering?" Gosh. To love at all is to risk grief. Of course it is! Loving IS risky..., but our lives aren't worth living without love.

And death is the thing that gives our lives meaning. It means that what we do matters, it means that how we live matters, how we love matters. It means that despite the fact that one day will we no longer be present, that we will be absent, it's important that we're here now.

And Ash Wednesday is tough because it's the one day every year that we, as a body, as a community, come together and look at the reality of our own deaths, together. It's the one day we set aside each year to look in the mirror, and see ourselves exactly as we are: as finite human beings who will die.

We WILL die.

But this thought, this truth, need not be something that causes us to live in fear or terror. Because the only way we can see ourselves rightly, exactly as we are, as finite human beings, is to see ourselves in the light of our God. Our God, our infinite God, the maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen, made you and made me and made every one of us. Our collect this evening says, "You hate nothing that you made," O God. And what did our God make? You and me. And far beyond hating us, way beyond hating us, our God loves us.

Our God LOVES us! Our God created us, sustains us, and loves us enough to become like us, and to stay with us, even unto death.

This is why our deaths, our very real deaths, do not have to cause us to live in fear. Because when we look down deep within ourselves, past all the veneer and paint and shiny stuff that we put up to try deny the reality of death and keep it at bay, what do we find? We find someone who will die, and someone whose death is held certainly, squarely, securely in the hand of the God who created them, who sustains them, and who loves them, to, and beyond, the last.

**This is who we are.**

I had a boss for a few years when I worked at a Christian summer camp in college, who, at the end of our morning meeting every day, would say to the staff, “Don’t forget who you and whose you are!” I’m sure some of y’all have this or some variation on it, but it really is the Ash Wednesday admonition in a nutshell!

Who we are: those who will die.

Whose we are: The God who created us and loves us infinitely.

So, tonight, in a few minutes, when we go to receive the ashes on our forehead, this marker of our mortality, let us remember who we are, and whose we are. And when we look in the mirror and see those ashes in the shape of the cross our Savior died on, let it give us hope.

Amen.