

Matthew 6:1-6. 16-21, Ash Wednesday A, 3/1/17 Pastor Ellen Schoepf

Ernest Becker, in his work entitled *The Denial of Death*, writes, “The irony of man’s condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive.” We live in a culture and world where anxiety of death impacts every aspect of our living. We live in a death-denying culture which tries to tell us that if we exercise, eat the proper foods, have plastic surgery or attempt to do any of the endless number of things our anti-aging society offers just maybe we can live forever. So, today as we gather together to confess our sins, mark ourselves with ashes and remind each other that we are all going to die, it is not the most Disney-like of experiences.

Our culture has no idea what to do with a day that celebrates the fact that we all sin and we are all going to die. Yet, as we gather together to mark this day, it is refreshing. It is refreshing and even liberating because we gather to remind each other of the truth, to remind each other of our mortality. And, as we tell each other this inescapable, audacious truth and receive ashes on our foreheads, we can finally exhale. As Lutheran Pastor, Nadia Bolz Weber, suggests, “It’s like the moment when you stop having to spiritually old your stomach in.”

In today's gospel reading, Jesus takes us to a deeper place as we face our mortality. Jesus takes us into a much deeper reflection regarding our lives and our existence. We are not only reminded that our destination is dust, that these bodies return to dust. Jesus also tells us that most of the stuff we consider to be worth living for – the treasures on earth that we store up – they also become dust as moth and rust consume them. The words we hear today remind us that every goal, every value, every dream, every treasure we hold dear is reduced to nothing, essentially reduced to dust. Today, scripture's words to us give us absolute truth as we have to face a perspective the world tries to hide, deny and ignore. We come face to face with the absolute certainty of our own death and it is jarring.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” So, where in these words do we find the liberating Good News? Well, the Good News comes to us as we remember, as we look back over our lives and remember our baptism and our calling. In baptism, we are reminded that our very lives are gifts from God. We have been created by God. Our lives have been molded and fashioned by the Creator. God has named us and claimed us as God's own, and our lives are not without meaning. And, the grace and power of God that has been present to each of us from formation in our mother's womb will be present to us throughout the entirety

of our lives. Named and claimed by the creator of all things, the very dust of our lives is holy and cherished by God.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Where is the Good News? Again, remember. Remember that the ashes on our foreheads are not just scattered there randomly. They are placed on our skin in the form of a cross, connecting us to Good Friday and Easter morning. And so, today, we also remember that we have been baptized into Christ’s death and we have already been raised to new life in him. We remember the hope and promise we have been given – we live in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

I love the way Nadia Bolz Weber comments on this hope and promise and the God who speaks this word to us as we come to Ash Wednesday.

She writes:

This God of which I speak is nothing if not a God of hope and promise. Here’s the image I have of Ash Wednesday: If our lives were a long piece of fabric with our baptism on one end and our funeral on another, and us not knowing what the distance is between the two, well then Ash Wednesday is a time when that fabric is pinched in the middle and then held up so that our baptism in the past and our funeral in the future meet. With these ashes it is as though the water and words from our baptism plus the earth and words from our funerals have come from the future to meet us here today. And in that meeting we are reminded of the promises of God. Promises which outlast our piety, outlast our efforts in self-improvement, outlast our earthly bodies and the limits of time.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” These ashes that we wear point us to the power, the grace and love of God, both at the beginning of our lives and at the end. And, these ashes in the form of a cross remind us of how we are called to live from the beginning of our lives to the end, that time between dust and dust. As we live between dust and dust, we are called to examine our lives, to continually listen to God’s call and re-orient the direction of our lives. This is what repentance is. Repentance, something that we intentionally focus on during Lent, is all about turning around, returning to the Lord, changing the direction in which we are moving. And, this call to turn around is never rooted in fear or guilt or duty. This call to turn is always centered in divine love and grace. The love that was there from the beginning of creation, the love that is present at the heart of creation and seen most fully in the cross, is the love that continually calls us to turn. This love calls us to actively turn around and this love transforms our ashes into hope.

Repentance is a process and it is never really finished. God’s voice calls us to this turning every day of our lives and it is a necessary part of a healthy spiritual life. So, we listen to God’s call, to God’s direction for our lives, and we ask, “Where am I? What is God calling me to be and where

is God calling me to go? How is God calling me to be changed and made new?”

Lent is about peeling away the layers of insulation and anesthesia which keep us from the truth of God’s promises. It is a time of self-reflection, sacrificial giving and prayer as we make our way through the tangled mess of our lives. It is a time when we can trudge through the lies of our death-defying culture and remember the truth about who we really are – God’s beloved children. It is a time when we can let go of defending and self-justifying ourselves. It is a time when can reflect upon the truth that we are very broken but we are also blessed and beloved of God.

Yes, we do live in a death-denying culture. And, yes, today is a day of liberating, Good News. As Nadia Bolz Weber says:

What is so wonderful about Ash Wednesday and Lent is that through being marked with the cross and reminded of our own mortality we are free. Reminded that the God of your salvation, the same God who created you from the very earth to which you will return – the very God of Moses and Sarah and Abraham is also God for you. This God delights in the truth that you are God’s very own redeemed sinner beloved in all your broken beauty. So, as you receive these ashes and hear the promise that you are dust and to dust you shall return, know that it is the truth and the truth will set you free in a way that nothing else ever can.