

Dust and the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10)

I am thankful that this Ash Wednesday comes with the reminder of grace along with death.

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I like the invitation of Lent to deeper contemplation.

I like that it begins as a Wednesday. *We interrupt this week of the usual busyness with this important reminder: you are going to die.*

Oh.

That's my response in my late middle age: oh. Ten years ago it would have been: yup. When I was even younger: whatever.

You are dust and to dust you will return.

Oh.

We have spent a modest amount of funds upgrading the prayer garden that can be found within our church's walls. We wanted to make it a place where cremains could be buried. What are the regulations for that?

"There are none."

"There are none? How can that be?"

"In our state there are none."

“But . . . it’s human remains, right?”

“No. It’s dust. Harmless dust.”

Oh.

You are dust and to dust you will return. This day, if you let it into your heart, can be one of the most powerful days of the year. It can also be the most humbling. The longer I am in a congregation, the harder this day gets. The words stick in my throat.

You, whose body I know is riddled with cancer: you are dust and to dust you will return.

You, my wife, who lives with an autoimmune disease: you are dust and to dust you will return.

You, my son, who I pray to God will outlive me: you are dust and to dust you will return.

Ash Wednesday 2022 hit deep. We had gone two years without it, and now, as I placed the ashes, I noted my own breath of life muted by the mask I was wearing. Ashes were placed on foreheads and hands with thinner skin than the last time. Widows and widowers, when once there were two, came up by themselves with their eyes watery and red-rimmed. *You are dust and to dust you will return.*

I know it’s important to remember that we are going to die. We are not in control of our own destiny. But my heart says, “Ease up. There is already so much death. Enough already.”

We want to control this ending (spoiler: we can’t). The vast majority don’t even get to pick the when and the how.

I am thankful that this day also comes with the reminder of the promise of grace, with Paul’s words to the Corinthians about “the day of salvation.” I hope you feel the presence of God as you place the ashes on those you love, especially those who may find their final resting place in the garden, surrounded by the walls of the church; those who will soon take their rightful place among the saints.