
Ash Wednesday Sermon

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
12:15 Ash Wednesday service

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Like most of the world, it was a surprise to wake up Monday morning and hear that Pope Benedict XVI was going to resign. It has been over 600 years since someone stepped down from the papacy. As to the reasons why, Pope Benedict cited his declining health (at 85) and his inability to physically fulfill his office. I believe the timing of this announcement was intentional, two days before Christians throughout the world gather to hear the words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

As a society we do not want to acknowledge our own limitations and the inevitability of death. Woody Allen says it best ""It's not that I am afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens."

Death is something we avoid. We push it out of our homes by relegating it to hospitals, nursing homes and hospice centers. As a nation, we spend billions of dollars to keep our loved ones hooked up to machines to prolong the inevitable just one more day.

Why? One Episcopal Theologian says the reason why is because "there was a time when Christians feared God, now we just fear death."

Are we afraid of death? Are we afraid to hear the words: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return"?

St. Paul writes, "Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting?" Yet, if we are really honest with ourselves, if we really examine our conscious and the way we live our lives, we know how we would answer St. Paul's questions. The reality is that death's victory is painfully real and death's sting is utterly paralyzing!

Instead of drawing us closer to God, the pain and sting of death tend to drive us further apart. Why God? Why? Why is my loved one now ashes and dust?

In the summer of 2005 I experienced death's victory and death's sting in a way that I have never before. I was working as a hospital chaplain in Houston, TX. My days were divided between St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital and its next-door neighbor, Texas Children's Hospital.

About halfway through the summer, it was my evening to be the on-call chaplain for both hospitals. Since St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital was the home of Texas Heart Institute, I spent most of my evenings on call in the cardiac wing, and that is what I was expecting on that particular evening. Instead, it was a slow night. I only received only three calls: 10:00 p.m., midnight, and 2:00 a.m.

Each call was two hours apart. Each call was to Texas Children's Hospital. And each call was from a different family requesting a baptism for their dying newborn child.

Each of those families had come to the hospital that day with great hope and excitement, they had come expecting birth and new life, but the day turned into one suffering and death , into ashes and dust!

It wasn't uncommon to be called on to do an emergency baptism. I had been called to that floor before during the summer, but that night something different happened. The sheer intensity of that evening shook me in ways that I have never been shaken. The sting of death was paralyzing and death's victory was real , so real it was the closest I have ever come to losing my faith!

The death of three beautiful infants and the visible suffering of those young families, made me seriously question: Why? Why the suffering? Why the death? Why am I following a God of ashes and dust?

I wrestled with those questions all night. Yet, as the sun rose I began to realize what gave those families comfort in the hour of death""It was when I took the oil and made the sign of the cross on their child's forehead and said the words: "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever."

Those families believed that there was a message greater than ashes and dust. It was the same belief that enabled St. Paul to write, "Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting?" Today's words are difficult to hear: Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return. But beneath those ashes there lies another cross, one that was made at your baptism, and one that is eternal.

These 40 days of Lent are a journey, an opportunity "to reconcile" and "to work with God." It is an opportunity to see that beneath the ashes and dust is the promise of resurrection and new life! This is the season and "now is the acceptable time." Now is the time to deepen our relationship with Christ. Lent is the time to see that Christ leads us TO the cross, so that He can lead us THROUGH the cross!

And if we keep the cross at the center of our Lenten Journey, we will come to see that it embraces all that is, has been, and will be, in our lives. St. Paul says, "Now is the acceptable time , Now is the day of salvation." Your Lenten Journey begins today!