

I'm often asked what Ash Wednesday is like for me when my family and kids receive their ashes. I think the underlying assumption is that it would be difficult to proclaim something like that to your own children, knowing all that this day means. And I think it's a fair question. But let me first ask you a question: what does it mean to you to have an ashen cross marked upon your forehead? What does it do to you to hear the words, "You are dust and to dust you shall return?" And as you think about that, consider that today there are millions of people all around the world who are gathering in places of worship to receive a cross of ashes, and hear the refrain, "You are dust and to dust you shall return." And I think it's fair to wonder, "Why?"

I mean, think about how you would explain Ash Wednesday to someone who had never heard of it before. We burn palm leaves from last year's Palm Sunday service to make ashes. We mix a little oil into the ashes and then smear them on our heads in the shape of a cross, all while hearing words that remind us of our mortality. I know that's maybe a little simplistic, but essentially that's what happens. From an outside perspective, there's not a lot of ways that this makes logical sense. Why would millions of people come to places of worship to put ashes on their heads and be reminded that they will die someday? I mean it hardly sounds like a good time.

Except if you are longing for something different – if you are longing for any little bit of good news which can free us from the bondage of despair that permeates our lives. If we understand Ash Wednesday as something that confronts us with our deepest fears and failures, but do not speak of the hope and beauty held within this day, then we are not speaking out of Christian faith and love. We aren't here because we're gluttons for self-loathing. We aren't here because we love thinking about our sinfulness or our inevitable death. We are here because we know our brokenness deeper than what shows up on the outside. We are here because contrary to many assumptions about our culture, we are hyper-aware of our death and gripped tightly in its fearful grasp. And we are here because we long to be free, we are here because we long for hope, we are here because we long for a bit of real joy, we are here because we long to believe in the power of God who makes all things new – who makes us new.

And as we gather, we lay bare all of our fears and anxieties, all of our sorrow and brokenness. We lay bare our humanness. But we do so in faith – a faith which reminds us that whatever shortcomings we may have, whatever sin and brokenness permeates our lives, whatever ways we experience death, we are not alone. God, by the glory of

Jesus Christ, is with us in and through all things – even our despair and brokenness and death. And by the grace of the cross, we have confidence that there is more to our lives than our sorrows and shortcomings, there is more to our lives than their endings, there is more to our being than dust returning to dust.

When I place the ashes on my children's foreheads, I'm filled with awe at who they are. That the living spirit of God has filled them with life and breath and being. That they are full of life, fearfully and wonderfully made by their Creator.

When I mark the sign of the cross on my children's foreheads, I remember how they have been called as children of God and that they are forever loved into being love for the sake of the world. And I marvel at the depth of God's desire to be in relationship with us.

And when I speak to them, reminding them that they, like all of us, are dust and one day we will return to dust, I am filled with a deep sense of gratitude. Because though an end will come, this moment is not that moment. And God has blessed us to be together in this time.

I believe that is the promise of Ash Wednesday. That's the invitation to journey in Lent. Our lives are not simply as a wisp of dust. Our lives are not worthless. We are not trivial in the grander scheme of things. This need not be a day of doom and gloom; it need not be a day of wallowing in our brokenness and death. This is a day where we bring all of our sorrows and brokenness and despair to the place where God meets us. Today, we remember who God is. Today, we stand in faith that though we may be dust, we are not alone. We are cherished by the Lord of the universe. Today, we declare with millions around the world, that it is a blessing to be filled with life.

My friends in Christ, I guess what I'm saying is that perhaps this Ash Wednesday sets before us a renewed invitation, as we journey into this Lenten season once again. In a season marked by fasting and prayer and discipline, perhaps we are being invited not to strain to the finish of our journey, but to live with gratitude and appreciation and joy at the life we have each day. Not to minimize the struggle or ignore the sorrow or to pretend brokenness doesn't exist. But to see the heart of what this day is really about. That from the dust of the earth, God formed you and made you with fear and trembling and wonder and delight. That by the cross, you are named and claimed forever by the love and grace of Christ, which transforms all of our brokenness and death into goodness and life. And by acknowledging you are dust, you can declare with all joy, you are fully and wholly alive this day. Amen.