

Ash Wednesday, 2/26/2020 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

This is my tenth Ash Wednesday at St. David's, and I have preached all ten times, both because I love Ash Wednesday and because Deacon Bill doesn't do the 7 AM service, and as long as I am going to write a sermon for one service, I figure I might as well preach all three. This year, however, I disobeyed my dearest preaching mentors and went back and read all nine of my previous Ash Wednesday sermons before writing this one, because I knew this year, Ash Wednesday was going to be different for me.

I've used the words "death-denying culture" frequently in past Ash Wednesday sermons. I've preached about how we are all going to die. But this year, the realization hits me differently. I've shared in several of my past Ash Wednesday sermons that I believe my early encounter with death—that is, my mother dying when I was six years old—made me hyperaware of death. Living in a death-denying culture sometimes drives me nuts, which is why I've long loved Ash Wednesday. But I've come to realize that, while I live with the constant realization that everyone I love is going to die, I have not thought as much about my own death. Six months ago, I would have sworn to you that was untrue, and I would have believed it. But nothing brought me face to face with my own mortality as much as learning that I had invasive ductal carcinoma. Breast cancer. Out of the blue. Found on a routine screening. I actually canceled the initial mammogram because they were running late and I had a meeting. It truly did not occur to me that annual mammograms, for me, were anything other than annoying appeasements to my healthy husband. The initial "suspicious" results surprised me, and the eventual diagnosis more than a month later shocked me.

I remembered I was dust, and to dust I shall return.

What in the world do I do with that? What do you?

Here's what we do. Following the example set in our liturgy this morning, after this sermon, I will invite us to observe together a holy Lent, a season of fasting and penitence. Self-examination. Self-denial. Reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

And as a mark of our mortal nature, we will receive ashes on our foreheads. Our lectionary always pairs this act with the Gospel reading from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that calls us on us to beware of practicing our piety before others. As I've said in multiple sermons, this is not an injunction against practicing our piety before others, such as having ashes smeared on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday: it's a *warning*, as well as an invitation to be authentic.

Don't embrace practices because other people want you to do them or because it's what's expected. This is what we have been trying to help our teenagers in our Confirm not Conform class understand. We want to help them figure out what *they* believe. Why are you here today? This is an ancient ritual, and I'm not going to ask you to write a paper about why we observe this day with ashes before I smudge you. If you are drawn to receive ashes, that's enough. I hope you are so drawn because you are accepting an invitation to a Holy Lent. And then, I hope you will try to observe a holy Lent.

Yesterday I received a text from my twenty-something niece Betty to my sister and me: “Okay, I’ve decided,” Betty texted. “I’m giving up cheese of Lent. What are you two doing for Lent?”

Betty’s Lenten discipline is a great one. Who doesn’t love cheese? I particularly love goat cheese. The prayer book invites us to fast. Sometimes this includes skipping meals, but more often, people fast from a specific food group. I’ve given up dessert before during Lent, for example. Bread. Meat. Alcohol. In fact, I gave up alcohol so often during Lent that it led to an examination of my relationship with alcohol, and now I haven’t drunk alcohol for over two years.

Now, figuring out a Lenten discipline is different than making a New Year’s resolutions. A discipline in Lent should be something that makes a little more room for God. Draws us a little closer to God. That’s what I figured out about alcohol. I gave it up for health reasons—it was making me feel physically sick—but, I feel closer to God now that I am no longer drinking. This isn’t a judgment against those who drink socially. It is working for me, and now looking back at how often I gave up alcohol for Lent, I see a pattern that wasn’t obvious to me at the time.

Please note that you don’t have to fast from something, but you can, and my niece giving up cheese made me swell with pride. If you have not yet chosen a Lenten discipline this year and you would like to, pay attention as we pray the Litany of Penitence in a few moments. We will confess our own hypocrisy and impatience. Our self-indulgent appetites and ways: hence some give up chocolate or alcohol. Our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts: I often give up buying books for Lent, because I am an intemperate lover of worldly goods and a compulsive book hoarder. We will also confess our negligence in prayer and worship: taking on attendance every Sunday, or committing to our Wednesday services during Lent, can be a way to address this. We will also confess waste and pollution of God’s creation, so some try to minimize their carbon footprint or otherwise reduce waste during Lent.

So back to that group text. My sister Wendy, who is also Betty’s mom, texted back that she was giving up “Chocolate and swearing. Plus,” she texted, “I’m committing to reading my Bible every day.” So, Wendy is fasting from a self-indulgent food group, as well as from an action that trips up many of us. But not only that: Wendy, a cradle Episcopalian, took to heart the invitation in our prayer book to “read and meditate on God’s holy Word,” and is committing to reading her Bible every day.

Note that Wendy is a chronic overachiever, so don’t feel bad if you can’t give up and take on that much stuff. Getting ashes on Ash Wednesday is a good start. Don’t compare yourself to her. But I’ll confess to you all that I was feeling a bit inferior with all of this cheese, chocolate, swearing and Bible talk, but I texted back:

“I’m contemplating death this year.”

Betty texted, “You’re giving up death for Lent?”

I answered, “I’m going to focus on my death. I’m taking on being a cancer patient. Lent is kind of decided for me this year.”

I know some of you will disapprove of that, preferring an embrace of pink ribbons or triumphant battle imagery, but, believe me: it's a gift. This experience has shown me that, despite my preaching year after year that we are a death-denying culture, in the past few months I have realized that while I preached it and even believed it, I didn't *know* it. I put ashes on your foreheads year after year, and sometimes wept over wrinkled skin or a baby's smooth skin or putting ashes on a forehead in the hospital for someone was moved to palliative care.

I know you all are going to die. I didn't truly *know* that *I* am until a few months ago. My deepest fear has not been death but been being alive alone, surviving my parents and my siblings and my husband. Now, I need to spend some time ruminating on my own death, because that will show me something about how I want to live: as a priest. As a wife. As a friend. As a writer. As a sister and an aunt.

As a follower of Jesus.

I am grateful to be here with all of you today, and grateful for the reminder we are about to receive of our mortality. Lent is a solemn, penitential time, but its purpose isn't to make us suffer for fun. We are learning how to live as God's people. We are preparing to be overcome by the miracle of the resurrection. We are leaning into death, because as Christians, death for us is never the last word.