

*On the face of things*  
Ash Wednesday  
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*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Tonight we enter into the Lenten season, forty days of self-reflection, of journeying with Jesus, of trying to grow ever more fully into the image of God.

But Lent isn't really the big news story of these recent days. The Olympics are here! They dominate the airwaves; amateur athletes and regular couch potatoes alike watch them with deep attention. They're safe for the whole family: no bad language, no inappropriate situations – and they're exciting!

Millions of people the world over watch the Games – we love the stories of courage, of disciplined hard work. We love to hear what these athletes have sacrificed in order to be in competition. When our favorites fall, we long for their redemption; when an underdog succeeds, we cheer.

The Olympics, a two week showcase of feats of human strength, may well spur meditation on human perfectibility, on the glories of human accomplishment. As well they should. It is amazing to me, always, that the Olympics even happen. That all

these folks come together from around the world to join in competition and camaraderie.

But if we are watching closely, if we are listening well, we also detect signs of our all-too-human limitations, writ large on the international canvass. We see the best of intentions go awry: that fourth torch that wouldn't light. The lousy ice that delays competition. The bad weather we can't really do much about. We see evidence, too, that even the fittest among us, the most experienced of athletes, are not invincible: we mourn, with surprise and regret, the death of Georgian luger, Nodar Kumaritashvili, on his practice run, just hours before the start of the games. Even, or perhaps particularly in the midst of our greatest displays of the heights of human athleticism, we cannot escape reminders of our mortality.

Our family didn't watch the opening ceremony, but I read afterward about the commentators' struggle to acknowledge the death while setting a hopeful and exciting tone for the rest of the evening's festivities. Despite bringing in a heavy hitter, an experienced broadcaster like Tom Brokaw, NBC apparently received numerous complaints about the coverage.

How do you go from death to hope so quickly? Could anyone have done it well? How do we transition from joy to sorrow and back again? How do we make sense of palms waved

in victorious celebration, in ecstatic welcome, burned now to ashes, reminders of our mortality?

How are we to understand this? To muster the energy?

A key strategy, employed by a good many Americans, is to deny that death exists, that sin and brokenness are real, and pervasive. I had a parishioner once who, having been raised in a hellfire and brimstone kind of church, had come to the conclusion that she didn't believe in sin. She rejected the notion outright; was done with feeling guilty. I love her to death, but we'd argue about this one. *Sin*, I would quote one of my ordination mentors' favorite jokes, *is the only empirically proven doctrine we've got.*

There's sin in the world, and we all die. Try, try, as we might, to postpone the inevitable – to cover our gray and keep in shape and rub in twice-daily anti-aging serums – we are all mortal. It was no less a personage than Ben Franklin who reminded us that the two certainties in this world are death and taxes. Death, at least, has been in the cards for the entirety of human history. It is a part of being human, of being a creature, of living in time. We are not the eternal God, and so our days are numbered. So, too, with sin. Try as we might for perfection, for lives lived righteously, we are prone to falter. We err in any number of ways, from a lack of self-reflection or self-discipline to an abundance of self-indulgence and self-righteousness. We suffer not only from compassion

fatigue, but from a shortfall of grace for our brothers and sisters, for our neighbors and enemies alike.

And yet we are hugely uncomfortable with these notions – of our inevitable sin and deaths. Christians of various stripes have tried to dismiss this discomfort, have tried to explain it away.

*Christians need not fear the grave – we have eternal life in Christ!*

*Christians need not be afraid of sin – their sin is cancelled in the cross of Christ!* I'm among them, a good chunk of the time.

While I periodically bemoan the shift in my metabolism that has come with age, while I still pull out gray hairs when they obstinately show up en masse, I don't worry that much about aging and death. I try to avoid sin – as most of us do – and much of the time, though I am ever aware of my shortfalls, I don't feel defeated by the power of sin and temptation in my life. I believe, with God's help, that we can grow more perfect in love and that hope keeps me going.

But we miss something critical – we miss something crucial to the Lenten journey, to the truth of the Scriptures and the good news of the Gospel – if we race too quickly to these theological absolutions.

On the other hand, the endless self-flagellation and self-abasement that faithful people have long enjoyed has been a problem since the days of Jesus, and before that the days of the

Hebrew prophets. Both our readings for the evening speak to us of the need for repentance, but offer warning and prohibition about the means and witness of those expressions of sin and remorse. *Rend your hearts and not your clothing! Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them!*

On this day, this Ash Wednesday, we are called to bear witness to our faith, to our mortality, to our sin; our tradition has us wearing our identity as Christians as literal marks on our faces. And our Gospel lesson tells us to pray in secret.

This is a strange day, marking the beginning of a strange season. How are we to know how to approach it? Should we give something up? Focus on our sin, so we will appreciate the great redemption we know in Christ? Should we focus on how our sacrifices pale in comparison to those of Jesus?

I think at the heart of the call to Lenten discipline – the heart of our Scripture lessons – is a call to tell the truth – however that telling might occur. We do it by marking our mortality, by marking our foreheads with ashes. We do it by rending our hearts – by acknowledging not just that we sin and we die, but that these are terrible, gut-wrenching, heart-rending facts.

Earlier this week, Fiona, our two and a half year old, fell down the flight of stairs from the second floor of our house to the first. We had gone up to the bathroom to find a pocket pack of

Kleenex before our adventure to the aquarium, and were standing at the top, about to walk down together. I must have had something else in my hand, because she was holding the railing and not my hand. She's pretty good at the steps – and though we always walk beside her – Josh points out that he always walks in front of her – she is pretty steady with the railing. But I was behind her, closing the gate at the top, that keeps the dog from sleeping on the beds, and she turned around to tell me about how we could share the water bottle we were bringing along. She was talking as she started to take a step – I said her name, wanting her to pay attention, but she stepped off, and she missed the next step. She fell all the way down – rolling and hitting her head and finally banging her head at the bottom of the steps, on the gate at the bottom. She was screaming, her nose was bleeding, and I thought I would throw up from the terror of watching her fall and not being able to stop her.

I scooped her up immediately, and found the ice pack, and a tissue for her nose, and tried to comfort her... then started worrying about concussions and spinal injuries, and whether I should have moved her. I was absolutely terrified that she would be injured seriously – horrified that I could have let this happen. I felt like the worst mother in the world.

I know kids fall down the stairs. I did it, my kid sister did it, the nurse in the doctors' office said her kids fell all the time. But even as we watched for signs of serious injury that never materialized, I worried that she was bleeding internally, that she fell asleep too readily, that she was crankier than usual because she was dying. A few days and trip to the doctor later, I am reassured that she is fine, excepting a sad bruise on her forehead.

The fear of death, I was reminded, is not often fear of our own death, but fear of losing those we love. The weight of sin is not hard to bear because of what we do to ourselves. We don't care if we overeat or don't go to the doctor or drive distracted or shoot our mouths off... but if that sin hurts someone we love, then we feel as though we could die. That we would rather die, then suffer the loss or pain of those whose lives are bound up in our own hearts.

It becomes a terrifying thing for me to acknowledge – not that I am dust, not that I will die – but that Josh will, and my parents, and my daughter. It is a terrifying thing to know that I do not love them as perfectly as they deserve, as my love insists I should.

But in Lent we are called to tell this terrifying truth. If we proclaim it too loudly, too boldly, others may well suspect that we do not understand the gravity of what we say. If we make a big

show of it, others may think that we are hypocrites, who look dismal while fasting for we have never known true hunger.

The challenge, for those of us who have been afraid, who have known the weight of sin and the threat of death, is to tell this truth – not to dismiss it, not to deny it – but to tell it, despite the fact that it rightly terrifies us.

The Scriptures and, indeed, the whole history of the church, assures us that in telling the truth, we will come to understand ourselves as God knows us: as children who are afraid and prone to error, as those who are pitiable for all our accomplishments, as those upon whom our God cannot help but pour out merciful love. In the Lenten season, in naming ourselves as mortal, in telling this truth, we may yet come to know God in a new way, to experience God not as judge, but as the one who scoops us up in loving arms when we fall – who sees our suffering, even of the self-inflicted variety – and seeks to dry our tears, to mend our broken hearts. A God whose love is so strong, so parental, so pure, that that God would rather die on a cross than see us suffer.

This Lenten season, let us tell the truth, and in so doing let us find courage and strength in the Lord our God. For as the words of the prophet tell us, the Lord is calling to us, coaxing us: *Yet even now... return to me with all your hearts... rend your hearts and not your clothing... Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious*

*and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.* Blessed be the name of the Lord, who delivers us from our sin and the power of death. Amen.