

Ash Wednesday: Dying to Live

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[0 : 00] Once again, welcome to the Ash Wednesday service, Church of the Advent. It's good to be here with you. Excuse me, I'm going to grab a quick drink of water. It's great to see you midweek.

We usually have to wait a whole week to see one another again, so it's really great to be here together. And I want to start off my shorter sermon.

It's going to be shorter than a Sunday morning. With telling you something about myself that might sound a little bit strange. It's not really a confession, I guess, but it may be a bit odd.

Ash Wednesday is actually one of my most favorite days in the church calendar. Don't get me wrong, I love Advent. And I love sort of the magic that goes along with Christmas. And I definitely love Easter. But I really like Ash Wednesday.

That might be strange. I've only been a pastor for like four months officially now. So I don't know if that's an unusual thing with pastors. But I haven't been to the job that long. But I like it. And the reason why I like it is because, I don't know if I would say I love, but I appreciate contemplating and thinking about and reflecting on death.

[1 : 05] Mostly my own death. And I do this in a number of ways, big ways and major inflection points in my life. And then just in like the weekly, daily rhythms of my life.

So every Sunday morning, we still get the paper delivered to our house. Just on Sundays, though. And I read the obituary section. And I think about the people who have died and the things that are written about them.

And what I would like written about me when I do die. I've made it a habit over the course of the past 10 or 15 years to visit cemeteries. We do this, my wife and I do this pretty regularly.

But especially in major inflection points. So about 13 years ago, my wife Susan and I got engaged. I proposed in Venice. It was wonderful. The next day, there's this. I don't know if any of you have been to Venice before.

But there's this. It's sort of like a floating cemetery. Right across a canal in Venice. So we went there the day after. It's very romantic, right? The day after getting engaged and walked around and looked at the tombstones.

[2 : 00] And we thought, okay, we have our life in front of us. What do we want our life to be about? What do we want to have written on our gravestones? We've been married for 10 years. And we went and did a trip this past summer in Paris.

And we did the same thing. We sort of took stock. Okay, how are we doing? Are we living our lives the way we want to? And cemeteries are places where it's just very rich for me to think about these things.

And the past five years, before we moved to Princeton, I was, before I moved to D.C., I was living in Princeton for five years. And I lived really close to a pretty famous cemetery.

Jonathan Edwards, if you've heard his name. He's a theologian and pastor. He's buried there. And I lived close enough that I would walk through the graveyard every single morning. I would put my leash on my dog. And I would say to my dog, Lewis, okay, Lewis, let's go for a walk and remind ourselves that we're going to die.

And I literally would do this. I would say that to my dog. And this was sort of my daily memento mori, the daily reminder that I'm going to die. And it would shape how I lived my life. The reason I like thinking about death, I think, is not because I want to die.

[3 : 03] Although the past two weeks, I've been pretty sick. And I don't know if I said, I wouldn't say I wanted to die, but I definitely want it to be like removed from my body a little bit. But I don't want to die. I definitely don't want to die. And I'm not a particularly morbid person.

I think death makes me sad, like it makes everybody else sad. The reason why I appreciate thinking about death is because when I face the reality of death, it just helps me live better.

I find that contemplating death is incredibly useful for channeling my attention, getting rid of distractions, and asking the right questions. And this whole line of thinking reminds me of one of my favorite poems by Mary Oliver, a poet who died a few months ago.

Her great poem, *The Summer Day It Ends*, with these last three lines reflecting on death here. She writes, doesn't everything die at last and too soon? And thinking about that, that everything dies too soon, she then says, asks the question, tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

And so on this cold Ash Wednesday evening, we're going to reflect on something that will warm our souls a little bit. We're going to reflect on death. And what I want to do tonight is reframe how we ought to think about death and how we ought to think about dying.

[4 : 16] So today is Ash Wednesday. It's the beginning of the season of Lent. Lent is a 40-day season, excluding Sundays. That mimics Jesus' 40-day fast in the wilderness.

And Lent functions as a time of intense spiritual exercise or training. I like to think of it as sort of a spiritual boot camp. And it helps us to get in shape, in spiritual shape. And it does so in two ways. And we need to hold these two things in tension. First, it reminds us of something. And secondly, it resources us. It reminds us that we're going to die. It reminds us that we're going to die. That sin, our complicity in sin, is so severe that we're going to die because of it.

We're reminded that the wages of sin is death. But Lent also resources us. It resources us with practices to leverage death, to use death as a tool, to basically use death in our spiritual tool belt, as it were, that can serve us and God's purposes in our lives.

Lent is a time to practice dying so that we might actually live lives worthy of the gospel. So this evening, I want to ask two questions together. Those questions are, why is death a part of our story?

[5 : 28] And secondly, how should we approach death? So let's pray together. Our Father, we're grateful to be here together, gathered as brothers and sisters.

I pray that you would help us to contemplate death, Christ's death, our death. In order that we might see more clearly the glory of the resurrection and anticipate it and live into it by your spirit.

I pray these things in Christ's name. So the first question, why is death a part of our story? And I want to read a quote from an author named Ernest Becker from *The Denial of Death*.

This book won the Pulitzer Prize like two weeks after he died. Kind of ironic, I guess. But the quote that I'm going to read gets at the real existential crisis of death.

Why death is such an issue. Why it feels so wrong. He writes this in *The Denial of Death*. This is the terror. To have emerged from nothing.

[6 : 29] To have a name. Consciousness of self. Deep inner feelings. And excruciating inner life. Inner yearning for life and self-expression. And with all this yet die.

It seems like a hoax. Which is why one type of cultural man rebels openly against the idea of God. What kind of deity would create such complex and fancy worm food?

Cynical deities, said the Greeks. Who use man's torments for their own amusement. I think as Christians, we can agree with much of what Ernest Becker writes here. Death is wrong.

It is wrong. Death is the reversal of God's intention for creation. It's not the way it's supposed to be. And what I want us to think about in terms of death this evening. Is death as disintegration.

Death as disintegration. And this idea of death as disintegration. Is captured in the grave reminder. Of the words that Tommy and I will say. When we put ashes on your forehead.

[7 : 32] Remember you are dust. And to dust you shall return. We'll do that in a few minutes. The first thing I want to point out about this reminder. Is that the real indictment of this sobering reminder.

Is not the fact that we are dust. Dust. It's not bad to be dust. According to the scriptures. God formed man from the dust of the earth. The first mention of dust is Genesis 2.7.

Before the fall. And it reads this way. Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground. And breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. And the man became a living creature.

You see human beings were made from the dust. And creatures made from the dust. Were the crown of God's creation. We were crowned with glory and honor. Creatures made from dust.

Psalm 8 puts it. The divine image was crafted from dust. And it's part of the goodness of creation. That was consummated with a benediction. In fact it is very good.

[8 : 26] God says. To be made from dust. So being made from dust is not a bad thing. It's not a tragedy. The tragedy of Ash Wednesday. Is the second part of the phrase. It's the reminder that to dust we shall return.

This means that order regresses to chaos. Disintegration is happening. It is the reminder that we're going to die. And of course. Death refers to the physical disintegration of our bodies. Our bodies breaking down. But the physical death that we will all experience. Is really a symptom of a graver dimension of disintegration. Physical death isn't the worst part of sin.

Well what is? The worst part of sin is the spiritual and relational breakdown. That results of it. So in Genesis 1 and 2. We didn't read it. But this is how the Bible begins. We see God is depicted as a God who brings order out of chaos.

He divides things. And he organizes things. And then he creates human beings. To take over where he left off. To represent him in the world. Human beings are entrusted with the care.

[9 : 30] The stewardship. The love of creation. We're to act like God would. As his representatives. That's what it means to be an image bearer. The human vocation is to. Essentially. One way of putting it.

Is to steward the integrity of God's creation. And the way that that is set out. Is we are to be rightly related to God. We're to be under God. Trusting God.

Believing God. Obeying God. Men and women. Human beings are supposed to be working together. In concert and in harmony. So the horizontal plane. Has a sense of integrity.

And under God together. We're going. We were intended to rule over creation. To bring it to full bloom. To cultivate the earth. To make it fruitful. But as we read in Genesis 3.

Adam and Eve disobeyed God. They disobeyed the commandment. They ate of the fruit. And they died. And the threefold curse. Corresponds to the threefold vocation.

[10 : 27] Serving under God. With other human beings. Over the earth. And each of those things. Adam and Eve are hiding from God. So they're estranged from God. They turn on each other.

And then we read in the curse. That the earth will produce thorns and thistles. And work will be laborious. And hellish. And so rather than integrity. We have creation marked by estrangement. And a loss of integrity. And disintegration. And of course it all ends in physical death. And death here is. I like to think of it as sort of an anti-sacrament. It's a symbol that points to a deeper reality. Death is an anti-sacrament. So why is death a part of our story? The first question. It's because each one of us. Not just Adam and Eve. But each one of us is complicit. We're victims. And we're perpetrators.

We suffer from. And we contribute to. Sin and death. And disintegration in the world. And tonight we need to face that head on. It's Ash Wednesday.

[11 : 24] That's what we do on Ash Wednesday. We remind ourselves that we're all going to die. So there's something very sobering about why we're here. And yet. And yet.

All hope is not lost. Death is not the final word. We don't have time to go into it now. But it's so interesting to me. At the end. Right after God pronounces all the curses.

What immediately happens. You know. I would think if. If. If God had just said all those things to me. After I disobeyed God. And said. You're going to be cursed.

The rest of. The world is cursed. You know. I might have. Sunk into a deep depression. Or maybe just. Sped things along. And just kind of ended things. I'm not sure. What I would have done. But Adam does something so surprising.

He. Names his wife Eve. Because she will be the mother of all of the living. Not all of the dying. Which I think. Is just a foreshadowing. That. Death is not going to end in death.

[12 : 20] It's going to end in life. And there's the sacrifice there. Death is not the final word. Easter is. New creation is. So Lent begins with Ash Wednesday. And it ends with Easter.

And we have to keep that in mind. Throughout all of Lent. Otherwise it would be. Absolutely unbearable. So the second question is. How should we approach death? If now we understand why.

It's part of the story. Because of what Adam and Eve did. And our complicity in it. How should we approach death? And I want to ask the question. Specifically as Christians. Again. I want to appeal to Ernest Becker.

I think he has some interesting insight here. Here. He argues that. Most Christians. Generally approach death. In this way.

Death basically is the engine. That drives most of our activity. We basically orient our lives. Around not dying. This is what he writes. Again. From the denial of death.

[13:14] The idea of death. The fear of it. Haunts the human animal. Like nothing else. It is a mainspring. Of human activity. Activity designed.

Largely. To avoid the fatality. Of death. To overcome it. By denying. In some way. That it is the finality. For man. So he argues that.

Trying to deny death. Is the thing that basically drives. Most of the activities. That human beings. And cultures have done. Throughout the ages. You know. As I thought about it.

I think it's just human nature. Human nature. There's really just two ways. That we deny death. And they're both forms. Of the same thing. They just run in opposite directions. And it's not surprising. When humans are faced with. Impending doom. Or terror. Or harm. What do we do? The fight or flight response. That's basically the way.

[14:08] The two different ways. That we tend to deny death. So first with flight. We try to run away from it. There's a funny graphic novel. Written by a. New Yorker cartoonist.

And it's called. Can we talk about something more pleasant? And this. It's kind of funny. It's kind of dark. And she's. It's sort of a memoir. About how she. Had to talk to her parents. That were aging and dying.

And explore the different ways. That she and her parents. Avoided the topic. Tried to distract themselves. And just. Just not talk about it. I think many of us. Tried to deny the fact. That we're going to die. We ignore it.

But this is why I think. 60% of Americans. Don't have wills. Or have their state plans in order. This is. The same reason. Why we don't go to the doctor. When we. Have that lump.

Or. There's some sort of symptom. We would just rather not know. We don't want to face it. And maybe. Maybe. If we run away from it. If we ignore it long enough. Death won't. Won't catch us. The other response.

[15:07] Is that we try to fight against it. And sometimes we vacillate. Between the two. But perhaps the. The greatest expression. Of fighting against death. Is the great Dylan Thomas poem. Do not go gentle.

Into that good night. Old age should burn. And rave at close of day. It's a great line. Rage. Rage. Against the dying of the light. Captures it. It's terrible. It's a terrible way.

To approach death. But I think a lot of us do that. And I think we see that. In just the. The complex. The industry. Of anti-aging. That we have in the west. And especially in America. With. Anti-aging creams.

And plastic surgeries. And cryonics. Or cryogenics. Where. There are people who. Pay hundreds of thousands of dollars. Right after you die. They'll put your body. Into a deep freeze.

Such. So that. In a few years. Hopefully they'll be able to resuscitate you. Because they. They are fighting against death. They don't want to die. They want to be immortal. Perhaps the. The craziest example. Of fighting against death.

[16:02] That I've. I've heard. I had a friend who studied at Oxford. A couple years ago. And while he was there. He had a fellow student. A British guy. I'm sure. Very intelligent. And he had a. A GoPro.

Strapped around his chest. Sort of like a necklace. And just sitting here. And what the GoPro would do. Is. It was programmed. Every 10 seconds. It would take a picture. And all those pictures. Were transferred to a hard drive. And he was hoping that. Basically. He would record. His memory. Every 10 seconds of it. And. If he happened to die. His. His brain.

So to speak. Would be. On a hard drive. And he would be able to. Download it. And. Get himself back. Or something. So fight or flight. We know. Neither approach works. Resistance is futile.

Death is always. Fatal. Right? We know this. But we still try to run away. We still try to fight against it. But I think as Christians. Especially as Christians. Neither of these approaches. Is really.

[16:56] Appropriate. I think we ought to. Approach death. In a. Qualitatively. Different way. Than. Other people. And Ash Wednesday. Confronts us with that.

It challenges us. With this. Lent. And Ash Wednesday. Refuses to let us off the hook. We can't. Run away. We have to face it. We can't fight against it. We are actually.

Equipped. Via Lent. To. Leverage death. For God's good purposes. So how is this possible? How can we leverage death? How can we take advantage of death? As it were.

Well this is the heart of the Christian faith. God's son. Took on flesh. In Jesus Christ. He became. Dust. It's one way of thinking about what the incarnation was.

God became dust. Subject to sin. And to death. And to disintegration. And this sinless savior. Suffered the curse of sin. And he died on a cross in our place.

[17 : 52] In order that by the grace of God. He might taste death for everyone. As it's put in Hebrews 2. Jesus tastes death for everyone. And of course we know.

That in Easter. We celebrate the fact that Jesus didn't stay dead. He was raised to new life. And Jesus' resurrection. His being raised to new life. Actually upends death.

It begins the reversal of death. And when we put our faith in Jesus Christ. We're freed from the ultimate bonds. And finality of death. And therefore from the fear of death. We're promised resurrection life.

The life of Christ. Death was not the final word for Jesus. And it doesn't need to be the final word for us. As we read in our Colossians passage. When Christ who is your life appears.

When he returns in the second advent. Then you also will appear with him. In glory. Because of the death. And the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Death becomes characteristic.

[18 : 46] Of the Christian life. Death becomes baked in. To what it means to be a Christian. I think this is what Jesus is getting at. In John 12 24. When he says, Truly, truly, I say to you. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies.

It remains alone. But if it dies. It bears much fruit. Whoever loses his life. Whoever loves his life. Loses it. And whoever hates his life in this world.

Will keep it for eternal life. What this means is that death becomes our tool. We leverage death in order. That we might live into the resurrection life of Christ.

And so Lent is a time where we practice dying. That we might more fully live. What this means is that death was once our greatest enemy. Now becomes one of our greatest servants.

I think this is kind of one of the things Paul is talking about in Romans 8. When he says that we're more than conquerors. All the things that could formerly hurt us. And destroy us. And kill us. Now end up becoming our servants.

[19 : 46] They serve us. And God's purposes in our lives. The Christian life. And especially during Lent. Is a time where we are to practice dying. Dying to self.

We're to actively kill. And put to death the sin. And the behaviors. And the thoughts that are destructive. And make us less human. This is what Paul is getting at. In Colossians 3. When he's telling us.

To put things to death. This is what he says again. He says. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you. Sexual immorality. Impurity. Passion. Evil.

Desire. And covetousness. Which is idolatry. On account of these things. The wrath of God is coming. We're going to die. In these two you once walked. When you were living in them.

But now you must put them all away. Anger. Wrath. Malice. Slander. And obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another. We're to put these things to death. There's an old word for it.

[20 : 42] It's a great word. We should have this be part of our vocabulary during Lent. We're to mortify these things. Mortification. We're to put them to death. And when we do these things. When we mortify to these things.

That make us less human. We actually are reintegrated. We become more and more. As God intended us to be. As his image bearers. We become more fully human. And this is one of the reasons why we fast during Lent.

When we fast. We forgo something. We give it up. We essentially say no to something. And when we're able to say no. To eating or drinking. We're building our spiritual muscles.

Because when we are able to resist something as natural and visceral. And strong as the desire to eat food. That self-control that we develop is transferable to other things that we need to resist.

So for instance. I find that if I am able to develop my self-control by fasting regularly. It's much easier for me. So if I can control not putting food into my mouth.

[21 : 44] It's much easier for me to control not saying that thing I shouldn't say to somebody else.

When we fast. And we develop our self-control by the spirit. We're able to put to death these things.

That destroy us. And actually kill us. And when we fast. We're not just saying no. Because we know nature abhors a vacuum. If we say no to something.

We need to replace it with something better. We need to say yes. And that's why Paul says. After we need to put things to death. He then tells us to put things on. And Lent is a time not just of fasting.

And not just of penitence and repentance. It's a time where we do special acts of charity. Where we go above and beyond in love. So Paul says put on then as God's chosen ones.

Holy and beloved compassionate hearts. Kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bearing with one another. And if one has a complaint against another forgiving each other. And he goes on.

Above all these put on love.

[22 : 45] So fasting, repentance and love. Are to characterize how we grow. And are reintegrated in this season of Lent.

I want to end this evening. One of my Lenten disciplines. Is to go through an anthology of poetry. You'll have noticed I've cited a few poems. Poems are really helpful for me. Especially in contemplating something.

As inexpressible. As inexpressible if you will. As death. To try to wrestle with it. But I read a poetry anthology. Called Waiting in the Wilderness.

By Malcolm Gite. And I want to read a poem. It was actually the poem that was emailed today. In the Lenten devotional to the church. This is a little plug for that. The Church of the Advent. We send out a daily devotional.

During the season of Lent. Somebody will write and reflect on. A passage of scripture. Or we'll have a poem. But this is a poem called Ash Wednesday. And I think it's a fitting poem.

[23 : 42] To end the sermon on Ash Wednesday. Because it captures both. The severity of Lent. And the finality of death. And our complicity in sin. But it also captures the hope.

That Lent ultimately points to. In Easter Sunday. It's a sonnet called Ash Wednesday. By Malcolm Gite. He's a poet and theologian. In England.

And I'll finish with this. This is what he writes. It says. Receive this cross of ash upon your brow. Brought from the burning. Of Palm Sunday's cross.

The forests of the world are burning now. And you make late repentance for the loss. But all the trees of God would clap their hands. The very stones themselves would shout and sing.

If you could covenant to love these lands. And recognize in Christ their Lord and King. He sees the slow destruction of the trees. He weeps to see the ancient places burn.

[24 : 42] And still you make what purchases you please. And still to dust and ashes you return. But hope could rise from ashes even now.

Beginning with this sign upon your brow. Let's pray. Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.