

God, Life and Everything (for 3/5/14)
"You Are Going to Die"

Ladies and Gentlemen, you are going to die.

Okay, those aren't the exact words we say today - Ash Wednesday - when we put ashes on people's foreheads, but we might as well. What we actually say is: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

You might be thinking to yourself: "Whoa! That's some weird morbid religion that goes around telling people they're going to die."

And you'd be right. Christianity is a bit weird. But that doesn't mean it doesn't speak truth.

Let's face it, you *are* going to die. We all are. Some sooner than others, but in the end, we will all take that lonely journey, that long sleep that we have to enter into by ourselves. This is true for every Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Scientologist, agnostic and atheist.

In a way, that's kind of cool - no matter what you believe, this is one thing we can all agree on - you are going to die. Death is the great equalizer in more than one way.

But, you may ask, why are we even talking about death? Sure, we know today is Ash Wednesday, but what does it have to do with death?

Ash Wednesday is the first day of the season of Lent. Lent, in turn, is a 40-day season of penitence and reflection in preparation for Easter. During Lent, we reflect on how human beings are so remarkably dense, so shallow, selfish, and plain old sinful.

We also reflect on our mortality - the reality that we are not God in any way shape or form. Nothing like a cold hard look in the mirror to help a person realize they just aren't all that deserving.

We spend these 40 days looking in the mirror, as it were, so that we can reflect all the more effectively on what Christ did on Good Friday when he died - and then on Easter when he rose to life again. Essentially, our story is that we humans have spent eons making ourselves terrified of God and of each other - so much so that we hide ourselves away from everyone.

We are terrified of God, too, because we have spent so many millennia convincing ourselves that God needs stuff from us, and that if we misbehave, God will zap us. We envision an angry, white-haired old man sitting in the clouds grousing about the insignificant ants down there who won't behave.

You may be aware that people sometimes get ideas into their heads that have nothing to do with reality, and scripture is a great record of the many ideas we've had about God. The Old Testament shows a tyrant but also a patient, loving friend. Sometimes the versions of God in the Old Testament directly oppose each other. It's as if there were some divine multiple personality disorder going on.

Only it never was God sitting angry in the clouds - it was our imaginations.

What Jesus did when he came was show us that A) you can't earn God's love; it's just given, and B) God really would love for us to love God back and, while we're at it, to love each other.

But how does God show love? Not just any love, but the love of a parent (think of the Prodigal Son)? Especially when we're all too busy cringing and hiding from God? By doing what any loving parent would do: you give yourself. Most parents I know are very protective of their children and would die to save their children's lives.

The way God did that was with Jesus. He came, taught, died to show the depths of God's love for us and rose to show us that it's real. And that when we die, it is not to nothingness but to a life of loving relationship.

Which brings us back to Ash Wednesday and that little smudge of ashes on our foreheads and those words: Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. These are not words of terror but of promise.

We start this season of reflection and self-examination with the most basic realization, that we are mortal. That we are here for a very short time. That even the most famous or infamous have only a modest, short-lived impact on the world before we are forgotten.

From the realization of our smallness, we can begin to see that life - real life - doesn't come from our small efforts. It's not something we *deserve* - as if we deserved anything in this world. It is all a gift.

That's what Lent prepares us for. We learn *not* to depend on our own pitiful efforts for what truly matters, and to depend on God instead.

So yes, Ladies and Gentlemen, you are going to die. And that is good news indeed.