

The Holy Mystery of Love

One of my favorite things about the church is the fact that we have a weird calendar that the world doesn't use but we cling to in a different way. And I think, this year, I needed this weird calendar to keep track of where we were. The days don't work anymore--it feels like a constant "what day is it?" struggle of work, rest, eat, sleep with only Sundays as my rock and steady. And in that calendar, the liturgical calendar, we have seasons too. Not just spring, summer, fall, and winter. There's advent and epiphany, lent, and "ordinary time." There are seasons that mark the time in different ways--in ways that line up with our historically important "dates" of our Christian calendar.

And so I guess I am really appreciating that calendar this year. Because as we do the things that come with this Lenten season, each Sunday of Lent gets closer and closer to what we now know as "the beginning of the pandemic." We have a season that marks our time and, like any calendar, it makes us think about what we were doing last year--so blissfully unaware of what was to come.

New Years was really hard this year. I had hope--but so many were saying that this pandemic wasn't something we weren't leaving in 2020--or maybe not even in 2021. And I am grateful for the Christian calendar year, which places us right now not in the beginning of a fresh new year but right in the thick, middle, messy part of the year. Today, Ash Wednesday puts us on the track of a dark couple of weeks-six or so-that get darker and darker.

Today, we recognize that we will die. And for a culture that is youth obsessed and continually having the average length of life be longer and longer, that is hard. In normal years, this might be the only reminder you hear all year--that you will die. That you will return to the breathless stardust that you were created out of.

In "normal" years anyway. And so there was a lot of talk about what this Ash Wednesday would look like--do people need to be reminded that they will die in a 12 month period when almost five hundred thousand Americans are dying around us? A year that 2.5 million people worldwide have been lost, grandmothers and fathers and nurses and teachers and church members and loved ones and children.

Do we still need to be reminded that we are dust? Yes. For different reasons. For some of us, we might think that we are too careful to die from it. Too powerful to die from it. Too good of healthcare to die from it. Too important to die from it. We need a reminder that good people, that important people, that careful people have all died.

And if we really lean into this church holy day, we will go on a journey together for the next 6 weeks. One that mirrors our world: it will get darker and darker. The light will become dimmer and dimmer as people continue to die around us. As we get closer to Holy Week, where Jesus

will host his last supper. When he will say goodbye to those he loves. When he will die on a cross. And then when he will sit, dead, in a tomb for a holy Saturday that looks a lot like where we are now. And if that's where you are right now--in a dark place that looks like it's just getting darker, I want you to know that this church, this story, the story of Jesus Christ, has place and a space for that darkness. You can rest in this and know that you are not alone.

And if you're a little uncomfortable with that idea, it's probably good that we have to slow down in this time and recognize it.

But if you've sat in that a little too long this year. If death is all around you and you've learned to swim in it but you need a little breath of fresh air to get through the rest, know that Easter is coming. Vaccines are coming. As we go through this darker time, know that light is breaking through bit by bit.

Know that you are loved by God just where you are and who you are right now. And that, yes, you will die. But with Christ, you also will see an Easter tide with lilies and the tomb rolled away.

And know that death, crying, and that black cross on your forehead are only temporary things of this world. And rest knowing that tonight, when you go wash your forehead off with your sink water or your skincare routine or maybe tomorrow's shower--remind yourself that that water isn't just anything. It is a reminder of your baptism. That you will die with Christ, but that you will also be raised with Christ, too. Know that that cross is on your forehead because you are a beloved child of God, and there's absolutely nothing you can do about it. That even when you clean it off, you are doing so with the water that connects us all together forever, through time and space, to all the saints that have come before and all of the saints that will come after. That's the holy mystery of this day. That's the holy mystery of love.

Remember that you are stardust and to stardust you will return. And thanks be to God.