
Death: The Entrance and Exit to Lent

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
Ash Wednesday – Year A

There are two important themes present in today's liturgy. The first theme is death: "you are dust and to dust you shall return." And the second theme, today marks the beginning of the holy season of Lent. You and I are gathered here today because it is important to hold these two themes together.

The first theme, death: "You are dust and to dust you shall return." Hearing those words and having ashes placed on your forehead is an awkward moment in the liturgy. But, it is also an important moment.

Many years ago, I went home to visit my 90-year-old grandmother at her assisted living facility. Let's be honest, visiting Grandmother Jan really meant being her chauffer for the day. We would go to the grocery store, Wal-mart, and her favorite errand of all, visiting the drugstore to terrorize the pharmacists. Ironically, the pharmacists happened to be my father and sister, her son and granddaughter.

One of my favorite memories of Grandmother Jan was watching her venture down the gift aisle at the drug store. One day, my grandmother noticed a long-legged frog container. It was the tackiest thing she had ever seen and she fell in love with it. Grandmother Jan held up that long-legged frog container and said, "Doesn't this remind you of me?"

You see, my grandmother was about 6 feet tall, with long extremely long legs, and even in her 90s, she would accentuate those long legs by wearing shorts that were too short for most women in their 20s.

So, my grandmother held up that long-legged frog container and walked over to the drug store counter and exclaimed, "This is going to be my urn!"

She told the cashier she wanted to charge it to my father's account and made a point to show everyone there was plenty of room for her ashes, and the long-legged frog would resemble her as laid in state on our mantle.

You can imagine the scene: The pharmacy techs were rendered speechless. My sister and father were mortified, yet also traumatized by the thought of her death. I was off to the side laughing. And the poor customers waiting for their medicine, well...I think they momentarily forgot they were waiting...because they enjoyed the family drama.

I think about that moment on Ash Wednesday, because hearing the words, "You are dust and to dust you shall return," is awkward and uncomfortable. But, as awkward and uncomfortable as those words might be, they are important, because they send us into the season of Lent.

We begin Lent with the words, "You are dust and to dust you shall return," but we end the season with Jesus on the cross saying, "It is finished." Death book ends this holy season of Lent.

This year, the theme of death is helping me structure my Lenten discipline. Let me tell you why.

This past year, we buried a number of amazing parishioners. Many of them were near and dear to our hearts. They blessed us by living full lives.

When Jesus is on the cross and says, “It is finished,” another way to translate it is by saying, “It is complete.”

A number of the parishioners we buried this year lived “complete” lives. They didn’t live perfect lives, because nothing is perfect. And, I am sure they left some things undone and incomplete, but these people had a contagious spirit; they exuded holiness, joy, love, and peace because they sought after the things that make life complete.

Their deaths have had a tremendous impact on me, so much that this Lent I have no desire to give up bourbon, chocolate, coffee, or wine. Instead, I want to follow the example of the saints I have buried, by living a complete life. This Lent, I want to go into the desert and discover where things are “complete” and “incomplete” in my life.

You see, when we are faced with the inevitability of death, when we hear the words “You are dust and to dust you shall return,” those false fronts and the self-glorification project we all participate in tend to fall away long enough for us to examine the deeper questions: Where are things in your life complete? And, where are things incomplete?

So, I invite you to join me in letting *death* help shape your Lenten journey.

Today, we begin with the words, “You are dust and to dust you shall return,” and a few weeks from now we gather in here on Good Friday to hear the words, “It is finished.”

Death is both the *entrance* and the *exit* to this season of Lent.

What happens between now and then is your Lenten journey.

The prayers, meditations, scripture readings, and daily disciplines are intended to draw you closer to God, but they are also intended to enable you to live a full, holy, and dare I say, complete life.

So, when we gather back here in a few weeks and exit this Lenten season through the door of death (that is the cross), what awaits us on the other side is the gift of resurrection and new life.