

This year Ash Wednesday is *early*. It feels *so* early. We are still cleaning up after Super Bowl parties and Valentine's Day is yet to come. Then, in the middle of it all, Ash Wednesday grabs our attention. For me it feels a bit unexpected and abrupt. I'm not quite ready for it. But ready or not, here it is! Today we walk around with ashes smudged on our foreheads. People line up in droves at "L" stations, schools, hospitals, and churches to be reminded that they are dust. One day a year Christianity collectively remember our mortality and death.

It's fitting that Ash Wednesday comes unexpectedly early; after all, death is often unexpected. We read about at least 10 unexpected deaths in a head on train collision in Germany.¹ We hear of an astounding 339 shooting victims in Chicago this year alone.² We have that dreaded moment when we answer a phone call that leaves us shocked and overwhelmed.

Death *is* disruptive. Lent *is* disruptive. Lent comes out of nowhere and takes over. Lent breaks into our winter routines and challenges us. It disrupts our calendars, our rhythms, and our comfort. Lent is a season of disruption that invites us to examine ourselves in truth, to be honest about our brokenness, to own our limitations, and to embrace our mortality.

¹ <http://abcnews.go.com/International/trains-collide-germany-10-dead-100-injured/story?id=36801660>

² <http://crime.chicagotribune.com/chicago/shootings/>

Each day we make hundreds maybe even thousands of decisions. One pastor writes that these decisions are really reflections of a smaller number of deeper commitments that we hold – commitments called habits. Our lives are a collection of habits. Taken together, they add up to a story about what we believe constitutes a *good life*. In Lent, we pause to ask, “Do the habits that I nurture add up to a good life?” We also wonder, “Have the ways in which I’ve stewarded my life increased or diminished my humanity?” If we’re honest, it’s probably much easier to nurture habits of self-centeredness and gratification and distraction. However, in calling to mind our tendencies toward the ego we enter into confession.³

Confession reminds us that our habits do not only affect ourselves but other people as well. Confession reminds us that our actions and inactions have lasting impacts on those struggling to embrace life. Our actions and inactions destroy the environment, our voting habits or absence thereof impact economics and policies, and our busied schedules do not allow time to truly connect with another. The way we live can diminish not only our humanity but also the humanity of other people around us.

³ <https://www.faithandleadership.com/content/tim-keel-grace-and-the-hopeful-honesty-lent>

This realization is what we hear in our readings today. The Psalmist looks with honesty and sees the ways his habits and actions have offended. The Psalmist recognizes the messiness of life, the pain, contradictions, and even evil in the real world. Yet, the Psalmist also acknowledges the power of truth and the delight of God in truth.

Today our Lenten season begins with the echoing refrain: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” With that refrain a cross of ash is placed on your forehead. The ashes come from the burnt palms from Palm Sunday. With these ashes we hold on to truth. We hold on to both Jesus’s glorious entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday *and* his execution on a cross. With these ashes we recall God who formed Adam from the dust of the ground, and we proclaim the truth that *all* return to dust when we die. And with that cross on your forehead we remember our death to come *and* we recall our baptism. For in baptism you were marked with a similar cross – a cross of oil and a symbol of new life.

So, sure, the ash on your forehead and the time of year together might surprise you. But, live into that surprise. What might seem like a mortal ending is actually an invitation. Our mortality is an offer to make each day a new beginning. With the cross on our brow today, we yearn for truth, we plead for honesty, and we pray for reconciliation. Welcome to the wilderness

of Lent. Fast, serve, give and be made new this Lent - for only in dying can we rise again. Amen.