

One of the things that always strike me about this day is that we begin the Season of Lent by remembering the end. It's not, however, just any ending, a generic ending. It is your ending and my ending that mark the beginning of this new season and that we remember this day. "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

Those words are the hinge between a dusty beginning, "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground," and a dusty ending, "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

We can talk about our beginning: where it happened, when it happened, who was there. But about our ending – when it will happen, where it will happen, how it will happen, who will be there – we don't know. None of us do. We can't know. But I know this. The reality of our ending is always before us.

From the day we are born there is a presence that accompanies us. It's our constant companion, invisible and yet ever present. Regardless of who we are or where we go, it goes with us. This companion, this presence, is named death. Today we mark ourselves with the ashes of mortality, a visible sign of our invisible companion.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that death comes only at the end of our physical life. Death meets us all along the road of life through various appearances. It's in those moments when we experience the fragility and uncertainty of life. At some level all fear is rooted in the fear of death. Death makes itself known in broken relationships, failures, shattered dreams, and lost opportunities. Death often dresses itself in our regrets and disappointments. We recognize death's presence in those times when we betray ourselves and live contrary to who we truly are or want to be. If you have ever known grief, then you have looked into the face of death. Each funeral we attend, especially when it is for someone our age or

younger, reminds us that everyone dies, and that we too one day will die. I wonder if the possibility of death is why some people stop celebrating birthdays.

We can try to forget, ignore, or deny death but no one escapes a final ending. But here is my question. What if escaping death is not the issue before us? I sometimes wonder if we have not only missed the point of Lent but maybe even missed the point of the gospel.

Maybe Lent and the gospel of Jesus are not primarily about being good, a program for changing from a bad person to a good person, so we can get a future reward. I have got nothing against being a good person (whatever that might mean) but I have never read where Jesus said, “I came that you might be good, better, an improved version of yourself.” What I have read is that Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Throughout the gospel he shows himself to be giving life, revealing life, and calling to life. And that’s not about tomorrow, after you die, or some heavenly future. “Now is the day of salvation,” Paul tells us. Now, in this time and in this place. Life is now.

And yet, how many of us grew up with the promise and hope of life after death and living forever? I did. It is what I wanted and sometimes I still do. For many of us life after death was, and maybe still is, the central focus and purpose of faith, Jesus, the Church. But the older I get and the more experience I get, the more urgent life before death becomes.

Is there life in my marriage? In my parenting? In my priesthood? In my friendships? Is there life in the way I am living in this moment? Is there life in the way I see the world and relate to others? Am I growing? Am I bringing life to others? Is there life in me even as I stand before death? And if there is not, why not? What needs to change, to be let go of, to be done differently? Those are not just questions for me. They are for all of us.

What if life before death is really what Lent is about? What if life before death is really what the ashes of mortality are pointing us to? What does life before death mean for and offer you?

Yes, life is defined, limited, and bounded by death, but it is not nullified by death. Death is not a diminishment or negation of life but its intensification. Mortality is what gives life its vitality.

Think about it like this. Death is the frame around the picture of our life. It focuses our attention. It intensifies and prioritizes what really matters. That this life does not last forever does not diminish life's value, it gives it value. The temporality of life means that this one moment, this now, is priceless. There will never be another moment like this one.

The question behind today's ashes is not whether you will die, what you will give up or do for Lent, or how to improve yourself. The question is about your life before death. What do you want to do with your life? How do you want to live? Do you have life before death?

The poet Mary Oliver captures this beautifully in her poem "When Death Comes." She writes:

*When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.*

"Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."