

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on February 17, 2010 (Ash Wednesday)

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” At its heart, the season of Lent, which begins today, is a call to remember. To remember the Lord your God in whom you live and move and have your being; to remember that you are mortal, formed of the earth; to remember that you are a sinful creature.

These are all weighty topics which get at the very essence of life and faith; issues we don't often confront. Which is why the Lenten invitation bids us not just to repentance but to self-examination. Most of us don't make much time to spiritually examine ourselves; to take a look at our lives in the context of our relationship with the divine. We're busy; life moves at warp speed; there are children to feed or parents to care for or doctors to visit or bills to pay or movies to watch. The internet beckons; the television demands our attention; the people in our lives are needy; work doesn't stop at 5:00 pm. The general din of life itself doesn't often provide the quiet space needed to gaze inward. But when we neglect our inner selves, our souls suffer. Our spiritual yearnings are choked. And there is precious little life that remains within our hearts.

The season of Lent, and Ash Wednesday in a particularly intense way, acts as a correction to this imbalance. It demands that we pay attention to our often neglected spiritual lives. It requires us to take a good hard look at the larger issues of the human condition; like life and death and sin and repentance.

In our gospel reading, Jesus tells us not to practice our piety before others. In other words, he warns against the hypocrisy of outward religious practices devoid of the inner conviction of the heart. I think the issue for us is less about practicing our piety before others than it is simply about practicing our piety at all. The greater temptation in this age is spiritual apathy rather than putting on a religious show. We're not inclined to say long, verbose prayers before eating in a restaurant in order to impress the other diners and the wait staff.

Fortunately, the season of Lent offers us the perfect opportunity to get back in touch with our spiritual lives. To reexamine, to realign, and to renew the priorities of our lives and get back to what really matters. And, again, what really matters is to remember; to remember that we only fully live through and with and in Jesus Christ.

You could argue that one cannot fully live unless one confronts his own mortality. And Ash Wednesday brings this concept to the fore. On this day we remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. We will all die. There is nothing truly permanent in this world except God. As the prophet Isaiah puts it, “All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.” Dead grass, dust, whatever metaphor you use the end result is the same: you and I have a limited

amount of time upon this earth. Knowledge of which can either make us want to curl up in the fetal position and give up or it can help us see the value of life. The power of our life-giving relationship with the risen Christ.

The good news on Ash Wednesday is that we don't confront our own mortality in isolation but within the context of the eternal life promised us by Jesus Christ. When our mortal bodies are committed to the grave "ashes to ashes and dust to dust" the story isn't over. That's the Easter promise that awaits us at the end of Lent but we can't authentically enter Lent without acknowledging the hope of the resurrection.

The connective tissue, if you will, is the sign of the cross. In a few moments I won't be putting a big X on your forehead marking you for death at a future, yet-to-be-determined date. Your forehead will be marked with a cross – the symbol of both death and life; of both mortality and immortality. And it's the same sign you received when you were baptized. Back then the priest or bishop made a cross on your forehead and said "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." Forever transcends earthly death. And these two statements work in tandem: you are marked as Christ's own forever even as you remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

This doesn't mean Lent is any less challenging and it doesn't diminish the opportunity for spiritual growth and reward. But this day allows us to both reflect upon our own mortality and the sinfulness of the human condition. We all fall far short of the Kingdom. I particularly appreciate the language of the Rite I confession here: "Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended against thy holy laws, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done." That pretty much sums it up.

But on this day we don't merely remember our mortality and sinfulness. We begin a season to remember God's gracious and everlasting mercy; to remember that our mortality is set within the context of Jesus' promise of eternal salvation; and to remember that our sin is forgiven. "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."