

Christ Church Valdosta, GA
 Ash Wednesday, February 17th, 2021
 The Rev. Dr. James C. Pace

“Remember that you are dust. And to dust shalt thou return.” Let’s be honest. If we are truly listening to those words and what they mean, they are tough to hear. Because words are powerful both when we say them and when we hear them.

Like many of you, I grew up in the Episcopal Church. We crisscross the years of our lives going from one liturgical season to the next, propelled forward by the continuing inertia of the sacraments, advent and Christmas wreaths, a star in the East, gifts of the wise people, baptism, transfiguring, the trappings of all-night watches, Stations and veneration of the cross, and the glorious dawn of resurrection. Wonderful ways to mark the passage of time, the life of Our Lord, and the ways to make life holy.

When a baby is baptized, there is a special moment in the liturgy when the celebrant dips his or her thumb into the oil of chrism and makes the sign of the cross on the baby’s forehead and proclaims: “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever.” When something is sealed up, we tend to think of something that is trapped inside, right? And when someone is marked forever, we tend to think this marking cannot be washed off. And during that moment in baptism we believe that a new life in Christ begins.

Now let’s move from birth to the to its opposite pole. At a funeral that I once attended, I heard the preacher tell a story I will never forget. He told us that on our tombstone one day there will be two dates. The date you are born and the date that you die. In between those two dates is a small dash. That small dash signifies a lifetime – all that comes between the first year and the last year. Everything one accomplishes in life is summed up by that ever so slight, often unseen, dash.

As a hospital chaplain, I attended many bedsides when the patient breathed their last. At some moment before that, if indicated, I would take the holy oil, trace the sign of the cross across the person’s forehead, and pray one of the most powerful prayers in the Prayer Book found in a section called *At Time of Death*. The prayer reads: “Depart O Christian soul out of this world, in the Name of God the Father who created you, In the Name of Jesus Christ who redeemed you, and in the Name of the Holy Spirit who sanctifies you. May your rest be this day in peace and your dwelling place in the Paradise of God.” Such a powerful moment; what was sealed was now freed. And with the release, the insertion of the dash between the dates ... and one is born into the great unknown of faith.

There are other times when the officiant marks the sign of the cross on one’s forehead. During the Ministry to the sick, for example, the cross is traced on the person’s forehead with these words: “I anoint you with oil in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As you are outwardly anointed with this holy oil, so may our Heavenly Father grant the inward anointing of the Holy Spirit.” That prayer continues with healing imagery: the granting of forgiveness, release from all that is evil, filled with all that is good, restoration, strength, and finally everlasting life.

And now we arrive at the liturgy for Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent when the grit of the ash will be scratched across our foreheads. Christ's fingerprint, the trace of the cross, reminds us of our mortality. "Remember that you are dust. And to that dust you shall return."

Lent gives us the time to size up our life and death quotient. Do we take life for granted? Do we go to bed each night knowing that a sunrise will always greet us? Do we think we will live forever? The season of Epiphany has manifested the Christ to us in untold ways these past few weeks. We discover the Christ to be the Son of God. Lent reminds us that the life of Jesus will be given for us so that we might have life. Life and Death measured by the length of a dash.

What is the purpose of those crusty little crosses traced on our foreheads? The gift of touch that occurs in time somewhere between the sealing following our birth and the cross that frees us at the moment of death and perhaps all those crosses of healing in between? Perhaps the purpose for today is the honest truth. During these next 40 days we stand in good company: Noah, Jonah, Moses, Adolescent Israel, and Jesus ... all went through ordeals that lasted 40 days; a count to 40 that began in weakness and emptiness but ended in new identity and new life. Somewhere in the midst of that dash of life, the dash between self and between a new awareness of self, there is true change. New ways to pray. To meditate. To listen for God. To know God. If we do these things ... the things that lent invites us to do, the outcome may just be a time, when no one is looking, to see the beauty of God all around us...a beauty which gives meaning and purpose to what we do and how we live each day.

This moment in time is a doorway. Let us NOT let this moment slip into unawares. We are being called forth to remember: to remember the cross of our baptism, the sealing of the Holy Spirit and the release of same when we return to the dust. We are in that precious middle dash, cradled in the loving arms of Jesus whose own death and resurrection is pressed on our memory by a simple cross of ash.

The church welcomes you and me into a deeper meaning of Lent. God does not desire our death, but rather, that we may turn from all harm and truly live into the image of the God that is sealed in us all. What begins in ashes on this day is the unmistakable handprint of God that gives life and love. A gracious and holy Lent to all.

Amen.