



## “Starting at the End”

Ash Wednesday

All Services

March 6, 2019

The Reverend Elizabeth E. Frey  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

I've been thinking about death a lot lately, going back to re-read some of the books I read in seminary about death and dying, reflecting on the sacredness of the end of life, and thinking back to profound and beautiful moments of death that I have been a part of. And yet, in the back of my mind, I wonder, “why am I thinking about death? Why am I contemplating something so morbid?” Perhaps you're thinking the same thing? We've been conditioned to not talk about death, maybe ignore it, or even to deny it will even happen.

Ira Byock, a doctor in Montana, views it this way: “We are raised and live in a death-defying culture,” he says. “Many of us shudder in recalling the deaths of people we knew, wince at the thought of those we love eventually dying and keep our own death a distant abstraction.”

But today, we – as well as other Christians around the world - are gathered to contemplate death, to acknowledge our mortality before God. Ash Wednesday is a day when we honestly face our mortality, honestly name our sins, and ask God to guide us in righteous living. We are honest with ourselves that we are finite and sinful beings, that we are desperately in need of the grace of God.

Our theme for today – this Ash Wednesday - is Starting at the End. So, this is why I've been thinking a lot about death and what this particular phrase means to me. From an early age, my parents were honest with my brother and I about death. They taught us to see death as a part of life and didn't shy us away from it, even as my grandparents died.

My maternal grandmother spent the last year of her life at my parents' home. She slept in a hospital bed in the living room; she was in the center of all the action, still getting around with a walker so she could spy on the neighbors, even weeks before she died. I will always look back at this time fondly. It was in her death in our midst that I witnessed the sacredness of the end of life, that I saw how God-filled death is.

Today we will all hear the words, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return” as an ash cross is marked on our foreheads. These words remind us – with that image of a cross – that someday, we will die. Ash to ash. Dust to dust.

And yet, these words mean so much more. "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." On Ash Wednesday, we start at the end to remind us of our beginning. We start at the end to remind us to whom we belong.

These words call to mind the creation story in Genesis 2: "then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." We are all made from the dust of the ground. Remember that you are dust... that is how we start. That is the beginning of our story.

But we are more than just dust. Genesis also tells us that God breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of the first human. It is God that brings us to life. Gungor, a contemporary Christian band, sings: "You make beautiful things. / You make beautiful things out of the dust. / You make beautiful things. / You make beautiful things out of us." We are made of God's beautiful dust, crafted by the master creator with God's very breath to give us life. Remember that you are dust... you are God's - created and claimed – and God's breath is a part of you. You belong to God.

We start at the end to remind us of our beginning, to remind us to whom we belong. Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber draws a beautiful image for Ash Wednesday. "If our lives were a long piece of fabric," she writes, "with our baptism on one end and our funeral on another, and we don't know the distance between the two, then Ash Wednesday is a time when that fabric is pinched in the middle and the ends are held up so that our baptism in the past and our funeral in the future meet. The water and words from our baptism plus the earth and words from our funerals have come from the past and the future to meet us in the present. And in that meeting we are reminded of the promises of God: That we are God's, that there is no sin, no darkness, and yes, no grave that God will not find us in and love us back to life."

Ash Wednesday is where the start and the end meet. We start at the end to remind us of our beginning and to remind us to whom we belong. In the start and in the end, God's promises meet us. In the start and in the end, God is present; God is part of these processes. As you receive ashes today, may you remember who created you and to whom you belong. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

Amen.

Copyright © 2019, Elizabeth E. Frey. All rights reserved.



[www.trinitycamphill.org](http://www.trinitycamphill.org)