

Ash Wednesday – Year A
6 February 2008
St. Anne’s Episcopal Church
Lee’s Summit, Missouri

In the name of the one holy and undivided trinity, one God. AMEN.

Do you ever see something in the newspaper that just grabs your attention and won’t let you go? It happened to me, as I read the *Kansas City Star* a couple of weeks ago, January 30th to be exact.

It was a classified ad – one of those “In Loving Memory” ads that sometimes appear on the obituary page. In the ad was a 1940-ish photo of a beautiful young woman with a sweet smile and little bows on her lace collar, a woman who had died just one year before the ad was placed.

“Mick, this photo announced our engagement in the Iowa newspapers. You were 18. Our families didn’t approve and our friends were skeptical. A Norwegian farm girl and an Italian city boy from Kansas City? No way, it won’t last, it will end; and they were right, it did end...*after 63 ½ years!*

I had to smile as I read that ad. What an incredible love story expressed in a classified ad! I read it a few more times just to savor that great love story in such an unexpected place.

And, then after a few readings, as if pulled by a magnet, I came back to the closing words...*it did end.*

Lives end. Even the lives of those who have loved deeply.

And, with those words, the ad got a hold of me and grabbed me. It jerked me right into reality. A reality that sometimes I'd like to ignore, maybe you would, too. Yes, human lives do end.

And to make it personal, as much as I love my husband, as much as I love my daughter...and I love them both a whole lot...yes, each of those earthly relationships will end. It's a painful truth. It's reality.

If we will allow it, Ash Wednesday is a day in the church year that I think can grab our attention and jerk us right into reality, too. It may be the day in the church year that does that best.

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

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Words from the Book of Genesis, words we will hear in a few moments as ashes are placed on our foreheads, words that will be said at our burial services.

Words that remind us of our mortality. Words that remind us that life is fragile and that none of us is granted an unlimited, inexhaustible amount of time – time to work, time to love, time to live.

For each of us, time will end. It's a painful truth. It's reality.

The ancient purpose of Lent was to serve as a period for new believers to prepare for Baptism at the Easter Vigil. The great festival of the early church that lasted all night, from sundown to sunrise.

It was also a time for Christians who had committed “notorious sins” – sins like recanting their faith in Christ in the face of severe persecution – for Christians who had been separated from the church to repent and return.

Lent remains a time for new believers to prepare for baptism. And, it remains a particularly good time for those separated from the church to return.

For all of us, it is a time to remember our own baptisms and to remember our own true identity. One preacher said it well - “Lent is a time when we strip away all the frills to get to the basics of what it means to be Christian.”

During Lent, we are called to rediscover who we are as children of God. We are called to face our disappointments and our fears and our failures and our sins with unflinching honesty, courage, and dignity. To face them in the light of God’s love and mercy.

The ashes on our foreheads remind us that we are made from the dust of the earth. Evidence that we will not remain in this world forever. It’s reality.

But, there is another reality on this Ash Wednesday.

The ashes on our foreheads remind us that we are made from the dust of the earth. Evidence that we were made by a God whose love was so great that that love simply could not contain itself and spilled over into creation.

Evidence that we were made by a God who formed us and knows us by name.

This is the reality of God's love and forgiveness. The reality that the God who created continues to create, continues to move in the world.

God didn't finish with us at our creation. No, God continues to form and shape us - to use us to do God's work and to share God's word in the world.

Claimed by God at baptism, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. We belong to God. And, we will continue to belong to God even after our mortal bodies have returned to dust.

So, today, as we begin this season of Lent, may it be a time to grow closer to this one who created us and loves us so very much – even beyond our

imagining. It is a time to recall who we are and whose we are and to deepen our understanding of how to use this gift of time we have been given by God – to be in right relationship with God and with each other, to live life as God intended it to be lived.

To strip away those things that may prevent us from knowing what it is to be Christian and to be servants of God.

To consider who we are in light of who God is.

To listen for God's voice and to share the deep parts of ourselves with God.

To read and study God's word in scripture.

To make a space for God in our hearts and in our lives.

To do God's work and to share God's word in the world.

May this Lenten season be a time to know that we can absolutely depend on God's love and forgiveness.

To know that the resurrection we will celebrate at the great feast of Easter is indeed our future.

AMEN.