

The measure of our days (Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)

It's hard for me to grasp that mortality is my fate, too.

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"You are dust, and to dust you shall return." These words will be spoken millions of times on Ash Wednesday, in dozens of languages, by people of every ethnicity, to people of every age. Just as they have been for centuries.

The sign of the cross will be made on the heads of bewildered babes in arms and on aged foreheads creased with wrinkles. Some will attend the last liturgy of their life on Ash Wednesday; some will attend the first.

All will hear the same message: that we are mortal, every single last one of us. And also: that our mortality is meant to be a wake-up call, an alarm louder than a trumpet blast at dawn. That alarm exists to draw our attention to the eternal God, our Creator, whose image we bear.

Not only the church but life itself sounds mortality's alarm relentlessly. Obituaries appear in the newspaper. Funerals must be led or attended. People we love die. The alarm is always ringing; we rarely heed it.

I confess that it's hard for me to grasp that mortality is my fate too. It's hard to grasp that the measure of my days isn't my bank balance, my reputation among my colleagues, the relative happiness of my family. It's hard to grasp that I am not the judge of the worth of my life.

"I am the LORD your God. You shall have no other gods before me." The first words of the covenant God makes with the people of Israel are the hardest words to keep. Because there are so many things I idolize. My task list. My feelings about my marriage. My own self-importance.

Ash Wednesday exists to wake me up to the fact that the measure of my days is the relationship I have with God. When I come to terms with that realization, the prophet Joel is right: it is with weeping, with mourning, with fasting that I encounter my Lord.

Because in the last year I have made mistakes. They have been made under the guise of holiness, most often. I have busied myself with the work of God. Wasn't that the right thing to do?

Well, no. Not if it meant I mistook my work for God's work, or somehow thought that I was necessary for the salvation of humanity. Not if it meant that I put myself in God's place.

Jesus teaches me to "store up treasures in heaven." He never says, "store up completed tasks on your to-do list." One more project done does not mean the day of my death is averted. It only means I might have been too busy to rejoice in God's gift to me: a precious day alive.

I only have two decades of Ash Wednesday under my belt. An adult convert, I wasn't raised with this ritual--but I can already tell it will take me a lifetime to grasp the message. If I ever do.

Fortunately, Ash Wednesday comes around again every year. As long as I have breath, I'll be there. Sign me up again to hear about the fact that someday, there will be no breath in this body. Sign me up again to hear the truth I still can't grasp. Sign me up to be part of the mass of mortal humanity grappling with the fact of our mortal humanity, with the dust we are and to which we shall return.