

February 14, Ash Wednesday (Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17)

There are two sure things in life: death and sin.

by [E. Carrington Heath](#) in the [January 31, 2018](#) issue

I've watched a lot of people die. I started my ministry as a hospital chaplain, and I've worked as a trauma chaplain and a hospice chaplain as well. I've watched people die peacefully of old age, with a loving family gathered at the bedside, saying good-bye with tears and laughter and giving thanks for a life well lived. I've also watched a young man bleed to death after being shot, his mother sobbing at his side, and I've gone home and washed the blood out of my shirt and struggled to make meaning of it all.

If this subject makes you uncomfortable, you are not alone. It makes me uncomfortable, too. And there's a part of me that thinks that talking about death, something so obviously depressing, is the wrong move for a pastor. Ministers are often told that we should preach only about happy things, and that if we don't, people will stop coming to our churches.

Maybe that's true. Most of the time I do try to preach sermons that focus on the good and hopeful parts of life. But if that's all I do, I'm doing the people of God a disservice—because my job as a minister of the gospel, particularly in the pulpit, is to tell the truth. And there is one big, uncomfortable truth we cannot avoid: sooner or later, no matter how we try to stop it or delay it, we are all going to die.

There's another uncomfortable truth as well. The old line about death and taxes really should say that there are two things you can be sure of in life: death, and the fact that while you live you are going to mess up. We are mortal, and we are fallible. These (even more than taxes) are the certainties of being a human being.

Ash Wednesday speaks to both. We receive ashes on our foreheads and hear the words, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." It's also a day when we repent of all the things that we aren't doing right. We confess our sins, and we say that over the course of the next 40 days we are going to try to do better. We are going to turn ourselves around, to set a new course.

The crowds at church are slightly smaller on Ash Wednesday than they are on Easter Sunday. Okay, they're nowhere close to Easter. That makes some sense; death and sin aren't big draws.

Add to that this strange little ritual we do. We burn the palms from last Palm Sunday, grind them up, and take the ashes and put them on our foreheads in the sign of a cross. Then we walk around, and people are so disconnected from this tradition that they think we have some dirt on our faces. It is an utterly foreign experience, and maybe one that we participate in only out of obligation, one that we don't look forward to at all.

I get all that. When our foreheads are marked with a cross of ashes and the dour minister intones, "Remember that you are dust," it feels like a morbid ritual. It seems like we are all being marked for death or something.

In recent years I've heard suggestions about how to change this ritual. Some clergy now impose the ashes using the words, "Remember, you are stardust!" like it's the start of some sort of show-stopping Broadway number. Others, in what is meant to be a show of inclusion of LGBTQ people, now mix glitter in with the ashes. As an LGBTQ person myself, I can assure you that I don't need glitter to let me know a church understands my life. These days, when LGBTQ people are under renewed attack, frankly I'd rather have a church that doesn't sugarcoat the truth about my mortality.

I guess that makes me an Ash Wednesday traditionalist. On this day we should resist the pressure to deny the reality of death. That does not, however, mean that we should preach a message of hopelessness. It has never meant that. When that cross of ashes goes on our heads, are we able to understand it to mean that we are God's own? What if we saw the ashes as a sign that we are marked not for death but for new life in Jesus Christ?

We are mortal, and we are fallible—but we are not hopeless. We are not doomed. We are, in fact, claimed by something much larger than ourselves. Those ashes are a sign that we are claimed by God, and if God lays claim to us, then nothing, not even our own mistakes or the end of our own life, will ever be enough to destroy us.

There is hope rising out of these ashes, new life of which a phoenix could only dream. There is a promise of resurrection that comes only from the one who has been resurrected. Maybe there isn't the rich pageantry of Easter Sunday; maybe

there aren't flowers and eggs. But in these ashes there is hope for even our darkest nights, and a sign of the joy that is to come.

After we receive our ashes, we are invited to be participants in the holy season of Lent. We are invited into a journey of new life. The closeness with God that this season can bring doesn't necessarily come from giving something up, or even taking something on. It comes first from this: the willingness to be marked as Christ's own and to find your hope in his story. The ashes are just a visible signal that you are ready to start a journey that can change everything. They are a sign of hope on our foreheads, a symbol of where we will put our hope during these 40 days.