

Ash Wednesday Meditation  
by Rev. Alex Creager  
Joel 2:12-16

<sup>12</sup>Yet even now, says the LORD,  
return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
<sup>13</sup>rend your hearts and not your clothing.

Return to the LORD, your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
and relents from punishing.

<sup>14</sup>Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,  
and leave a blessing behind him,  
a grain offering and a drink offering  
for the LORD, your God?

<sup>15</sup>Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
sanctify a fast;  
call a solemn assembly;  
<sup>16</sup>gather the people.  
Sanctify the congregation;  
assemble the aged;  
gather the children,  
even infants at the breast.  
Let the bridegroom leave his room,  
and the bride her canopy.

This is the Word of the Lord.  
**Thanks be to God.**

On Ash Wednesday, I am always reminded of my mortality, of my need for grace and love and help in this life. After all, we say today, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

But I’m also reminded this year of a song by the singer-songwriter Jason Isbell. It’s a song he wrote a few years ago for his wife Amanda Shires, called “*If We Were*

*Vampires.*” In the song, he writes about how he would live if he were a vampire – if death and loss and mortality were not a thing. And he writes that things would have far less value to him, that he wouldn’t think about and value each day, singing:

*If we were vampires and death was a joke  
We'd go out on the sidewalk and smoke  
And laugh at all the lovers and their plans  
I wouldn't feel the need to hold your hand.*

Intimacy, love, vulnerability, connection would be lost. He would miss the small things that are really the big things, and instead just try to be cool and mock others that value life, that value love, that value connection and faith, and the small things.

He then sings that he is actually grateful that we are not vampires, that we are mortal, from dust we came and to dust we shall return, saying:

*Likely one of us will have to spend some days alone  
Maybe we'll get forty years together  
But one day I'll be gone  
Or one day you'll be gone*

*Maybe time running out is a gift  
I'll work hard 'til the end of my shift  
And give you every second I can find*

And it’s in that realization of limited time, of finitude and mortality, that he finds such great love and value in all the small things and connections and care, especially for his wife Amanda. He sings:

*How the light comes off of your skin.  
Your fragile heart you protected for so long.  
Your mercy in your sense of right and wrong.  
Your hands searching in the dark,  
Or your nails leaving love’s watermark.*

Knowing that their time is limited makes him love his wife even more, even the times she scratches him in the middle of the night looking for something.

It's a beautiful song of love. It's also a beautiful song that reminds me that time is a gift. That each week, each day, each moment matters. And we can choose to let it pass us by, we can choose to play it cool and mock at intimacy and faith, risk, and true love. Or we can dive in. We can pay attention. We can dare to come closer—to God, to one another, to this word, to faith and love and hope and care. We can remember that this is the day the Lord has made, and we can truly rejoice and be glad in it.

Often times, we may think of this season we are entering into – the season of Lent – only for those who are truly pious and holy, and have it all together, as if there is anyone that truly has it all together. We may think it is only for high priests or monks hidden away in mountains or that one true saint of the church. But the truth is this season is for all who are seeking to know that time is a gift, that each day matters, that God's love and grace is abounding for all of us.

In our reading from Paul's second letter to Corinth, he shares that he does not want any barrier to be put up for anyone to know God's love, grace, and fullness of life. And in our reading for Joel, the prophet calls the entire community to connect closer to God. Not just the high priests. Not just the holy ones. But everyone, of all ages and backgrounds and life situations:

*“Gather the people,” he says.*

*“Sanctify the congregation;*

*assemble the aged;*

*gather the children,*

*even infants at the breast.*

God wants everyone to come closer, to know life and love, connection, and community, hope and salvation. And God doesn't want us to wait another day, saying:

*Let the bridegroom leave his room,  
and the bride her canopy.”*

Today, Ash Wednesday, is a day for us to remember our mortality, our need for God's grace and love. It's also a day though, for us to remember that each day is a gift. And that God is inviting us to know life, and know it abundantly. So this Lenten season, we will be inviting you all to join us in some practices that help us connect to God and neighbor, love and grace, hope and faith. Some will invite you to try something new – like fasting or exploring art. Others will invite you to slow down and enjoy the day – like mindfulness and going outside for a walk.

And tonight we invite you to come forward and receive ashes, remembering that today is a gift.