

Every year, my seminary prays for all of its living alumni by name during its chapel services. They do it by graduating class, with several alumni being prayed for on each day of the academic year. The oldest surviving graduates are prayed for in September towards the beginning of the Fall quarter. And the most recent graduates are prayed for at the end of the spring quarter. And they send out note cards to each alumnus signed both by the dean and by the particular person who led the prayers in chapel that day and lifted each of us up in prayer.

In 1996, the year after I graduated, I got my first notecard letting me know that I was prayed for on June 3, just a few days before the end of that academic year. In 1997, my date had moved into May. And it's moved earlier year by year. This year, almost 26 years after my graduation, I just got my card saying that I was prayed for in the seminary chapel on January 31.

So not only am I middle-aged. I'm also right in the middle of the pack of the surviving alumni of my seminary.

But that shouldn't be surprising. After all, after every day that passes we are one day older. And after every day that passes, we are one day closer to the day of our death. That's part of the message of Ash Wednesday. Remember...

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Remember that you are mortal. Remember that you are finite. Remember that one day, you will die.

That can be a sobering message. Sometimes that's an easy message to ignore and it takes Ash Wednesday to remind us of our mortality. Some years it takes Ash Wednesday to grab us by the lapels and shake us with that dose of reality: "remember that you are dust."

But after the past year, we've had pretty grim and continuing reminders of our mortality. The world-wide COVID pandemic really started cranking up in Lent of last year. And as we begin Lent this year, we are still under the shadow of that same pandemic. We have been reminded over and over again this past year of our mortality, of the fragility of life. In a certain way, Lent 2020 never really ended—it's wrapped around the rest of the year to now hand the baton to Lent 2021.

Of course, we did have Easter last year. Yes, we did have Christmas. But during this entire past year, we've also had stark reminders all year long: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

But as Christians, we live with a dual reality. Yes, we are mortal. Yes we will die.

But, we are also promised immortality. As St. Paul reminds us in the 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians, we will all be changed. The perishable will become imperishable; our dying bodies will be transformed into bodies that will never die. What is now mortal will be clothed in immortality.¹

That is what we celebrate in Holy Baptism. We share in the death of Christ so that we may share in his resurrection.

¹ 1Cor 15:51-54

That's what we celebrate in Holy Communion. We sacramentally share in Christ's sacrifice on our behalf, as a foretaste of the new eternal life he promises.

Every day we are one day closer to death. But for Christians, every day we are also one day closer to immortality. As we say in our burial service, "through the grave and gate of death (we) pass with (Jesus Christ into) our joyful resurrection."²

On Ash Wednesday, remember who you are:
You are dust, and to dust you shall return.

But on Ash Wednesday, remember also whose you are:
You are a child of God. You have been redeemed by Jesus Christ and bought with the price of his own blood. And he promises to bring you to glory everlasting.

In the seventies there was a popular poster that came from a line in a 1969 John Denver song:

"Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

Yes, today you draw one day closer to death.
But today is also the first day of the rest of your life.

That's part the meaning of Ash Wednesday. We confess our sins to God, not so that we may wallow in our wickedness. We confess our sins so that we may leave them behind, so that we may move forward with God. Today we can recommit ourselves to live the rest of our lives seeking to walk in God's ways.

Today we can make a new start. Today we can make a new beginning. Today we can wipe the slate clean. We can turn the Etch-a-Sketch over and shake it and clear the screen of what has gone before.

God's forgiveness is never more than one prayer away. Today we will offer those prayers. Today we will be assured of God's forgiveness.

And today in Thanksgiving, we will celebrate again the holy meal whose name, the Holy Eucharist, literally means thanksgiving.

We give thanks to God for his forgiveness.
We give thanks to God for his gift of new life.

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.
Remember that you are God's, and to God you shall return.

² BCP p 480