

“Jarring but Hopeful”
Joel 2:1–2, 12–17
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
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I walked into the office Monday morning and Jennie greeted me with these words, “I have your ashes here.” “My ashes?” I said, “I thought I was still alive...” Looking at the two containers on her desk, I quickly realized what she was talking about. Mary Powell Rhodes had left the burned palm fronds for this Ash Wednesday service. And I have probably had too much fun with this greeting. But it is jarring to think about your own ashes, your own remains, your own mortality.

But that’s what this service is about, at least in part, it’s about our mortality, and another picker-upper — our sinful nature. Our son Ian loves to call his dad “the Bluebird of Happiness” in a facetious way, and Mary Hauser even found me a forty-five of the song, but even I can be dragged down by these topics. No wonder concerts and ballgames are packed and the church struggles to fill its pews. They sing happy songs and play exciting games while we talk about death and sin!

And yet, strange as it may seem, there is hope in this service as well as deep wisdom. I confess that it is one of my favorite services of the year, and not just because I am drawn to stories set in a minor key, but because there is much here to address our deepest needs.

One helpful part of this service is that it enables us to face a reality that cannot be avoided. We try hard to deny the inevitability of death. We don’t even want to acknowledge aging because doing so hints at the possibility of death. But no matter how much make-up, hair coloring, and plastic surgery we have and use, we’re still getting older one day at a time. We may shield our eyes for a while, but eventually we will see.

I remember asking Peggy Frisbie how her cataract surgery had gone. “Terribly!” she said, “I looked in the mirror and wondered who that old woman was.” Seeing clearly, especially ourselves, has advantages and disadvantages, but we need to see.

Not talking about a deep existential fear does not make it go away. It simply gives it more power. Naming a demon is the first step toward challenging it. This isn't Beetlejuice in reverse, for those who get the reference. We don't say, "Death, death, death!" and it's gone! But naming this challenge does lessen our anxiety. It allows us to ask questions, talk about things that matter, realize we are not alone, even begin to think about the possibility of life after death.

The 1957 Ingmar Bergman film "The Seventh Seal" tells the story of a knight's chess match with death during the Black Death of the fourteenth century. It is a masterful film which explores not only the inevitability of death but the silence of God. The knight tries every move he knows, but in the end, there is no way to beat death. It seems tragic, a bit like watching "Titanic", but in the making of this film, Bergman said he found catharsis from his own crippling fear of death simply because it dealt with the subject so directly. Ash Wednesday helps us to experience catharsis.

In a recent *Christian Century* article, Episcopal Rector Elizabeth Felicetti talks about her experience with mortality and Ash Wednesday (February 2024, p. 27). After sixteen years of imposing ashes on others, last year she was unable to do so because she was fighting cancer that had taken one of her lungs and spread to her aorta.

She came in late to receive ashes, wondering if her colleague had a thought running through her head that she had many times during these services — will this be the last time I impose ashes on Elizabeth's forehead? It was jarring, to say the least, but once she made her way down to the front and knelt between her sister and a parishioner, she no longer felt self-conscious but experienced a deep sense of kinship with others. She was just one of many made of dust on her way back.

This service enables us to face a reality that cannot be avoided. It also expresses hope as we think about our sinful nature, individually and communally. The reading from Joel highlights this hope. Joel offers a call to repentance which may seem to point simply to the dark side of human experience. "The day of the Lord is coming," he says, "a day of

clouds and thick darkness.” So, God invites the people to return with all their heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning...

We may wonder how this is hopeful, but there would be no reason to return to God if there were no possibility of forgiveness. And Joel goes on to say, “For God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love... who knows whether God will not turn and relent and leave a blessing behind?”

We find the first part of this, “God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,” over and over again in scripture — in Exodus 34:6, Numbers 14:18, Nehemiah 9:17, Jonah 4:2, and throughout the psalms. We see it embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

We find the second part, “Who knows?” throughout scripture too. There is no guarantee of favor and forgiveness, but given God’s basic character, who knows? God may extend grace. When David and Bathsheba’s child dies, David says, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, ‘Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me, and the child may live (2 Samuel 12:22)?’” Who knows? God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

There is hope in this reality, hope that brings us back again and again. As with our mortality, we may seek to deny our brokenness and sin as people or as a community and nation, but doing so doesn’t make it go away. It only gives it more power. It’s like some kind of spiritual virus that drags down the functionality of our operating system. The only way to function fully is by dealing with the virus directly. The good news is we have programming to do that. It’s called repentance and reconciliation, returning to a God of mercy and love.

Writing about the hope of Ash Wednesday, Old Testament scholar Cameron B. R. Howard says this (*workingpreacher.org*).

Gathering together for personal and communal repentance on Ash Wednesday is an act of hope. The very act of coming together and publicly renouncing our sin testifies to our confidence in God’s mercy. One does not have to look far in this world to see great

calamity. It often does seem that ‘the great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast (Zephaniah 1:14).’ We live in a state of communal, systemic sinfulness that wreaks powerful consequences. We also know that God has the power to avert those disasters and to help us to change our ways, and so we come together to pray and to hope: Who knows?

Indeed, who knows about life and death and life after death; about sin and forgiveness, desolation and hope for us and the world around us? It is not easy to face deep existential fears like sin and death, it is jarring, but they must be faced, and what better place to do so than here, in the assurance of God’s mercy and love, and with these people with whom we share such a deep bond?