

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI
“We All Fall Down...”
Rev. Lou Nyiri
February 14, 2024 (Ash Wednesday)

[Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21](#)

Ring around the rosie
A pocket full of posie
Ashes / Ashes
WE all fall down!

So goes the children’s nursery rhyme.

I recited it as a child.
I’ve recited it as an adult.
I’ve never really paused long enough to think about what it means.

One theory is it is simply a children’s nursery rhyme game – whereby children stand in a circle, recite the lines – then curtsy or bow at the end and the last child to do so it put into the middle of the circle.

Another links it to The Great Plague which happened in England in 1665 – or -earlier outbreaks of that death declaring disease in England.

By about 1951 it seems to have become well established that the rhyme form had become standard in the United Kingdom.

Authorities on nursery rhymes, remarked:

The invariable sneezing and falling down in modern English versions have given would-be origin finders the opportunity to say that the rhyme dates back to the Great Plague. A rosy rash, they allege, was a symptom of the plague, and posies of herbs were carried as protection and to ward off the smell of the disease. Sneezing or coughing was a final fatal symptom, and "all fall down" was exactly what happened.¹

The line *Ashes, Ashes* in colonial versions of the rhyme is claimed to refer variously to cremation of the bodies, the burning of victims' houses, or darkening pallor of their skin, and the theory has been adapted to be applied to other versions of the rhyme.²

Having moved through a pandemic which claimed over 2 MILLION lives.
Every time we turn on the news it seems there’s a new headline reporting death:
Today’s shooting at the Kansas City Chiefs celebration parade that has claimed one life.
Today is the six year anniversary of the Parkland, FL shooting at Marjory Stoneman Dougals High School which killed 17 people.
Last month, there have been a little over 10,000 civilian deaths in the Ukraine / Russian war.
More than 29,000 people have died in the Israel Hamas war.

¹ Wikipedia, notes 25, 26 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ring_a_Ring_o%27_Roses

² Ibid, note #26

Do we need one more glaring reality of our mortality.

And yet, each year in our liturgical calendar we find ourselves in exactly this same place – remembering our faith by looking toward the end of life here on earth.

Life Coaches, like Stephen Covey, often have us envision the day of our death – by planning our own funeral – the exercise is simple – think about three people who will speak at your funeral – one from work; one from family; one from place of worship – what do you want them to say about you after you've died.

The intent of this exercise is not morbidity – it is to discern what you hold deeply valuable – who you want to be for the people around you – and that gives you mooring and direction to live into such a person.

Now, when I say 'you' here – I'm including myself.

The point being – if you want people to say of you at your death that you were: caring, supportive, loving, listening, - then you need to live into those words – making them real by your actions.

My Dad had a saying that I often chalked up to my old man's sardonic wit, he would say, "Son, the day you're born is the day you start dying."

Standing by him in the Emergency Room bay at Center Community Hospital in State College, PA, "Dad are you dying?"

And he said, "we're all one day closer to our death with each day that passes us by."

So, I countered, "What I mean dad, is are you actively dying?"

To which he simply nodded in the affirmative.

Then he closed his eyes and rested...and our family waited...
How many family's have come to this stark realization?

In that ER bay, sitting next to him I leafed through the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship that I'd brought with me to assemble liturgy for that year's Ash Wednesday Worship Service.

It is also why whenever I plan Ash Wednesday, you will see almost identical liturgy.

Because today, for all our faith, is a tough.

Today we recall our mortality.

We do so in an irregularly shaped plus sign in the middle of our foreheads or on the back of our hands,– an ashen cross calling us to "Remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return."

It's a tough concept to get our heads around – especially when we're younger – that we come into this world – we live for but a short time – then we die.

Despite all these things we can do, we cannot overcome one thing – death.

In this regard, we are powerless...and we have difficulty accepting this message.

Maybe this is why Ash Wednesday is counter-cultural for us.

We are dust and shall return to dust.

We seldom stop long enough to consider this fact of our existence – let alone dwell on it for any length of time.

And yet it is verifiable fact – everything living will one day die.

We are in good company though as people who don't like to think of such things.

An older couple on Ash Wednesday, came to the stark realization of their own mortality – not because they had several decades to their living, rather they stood behind a young parent with sleeping child in his arms.

The pastor marked the parent's forehead, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Then the pastor marked the sleeping baby's forehead, their eyes stung with tears, "You are dust," he whispered to the sleeping baby, "and to dust you shall return."

As the pastor marked this older couple's foreheads, they could not stop thinking about that young child just moments earlier.

There is but one way out of this world, they thought, the way of death.

It's a stark reality.

The following epitaph, matches Ash Wednesday's dissonant timbre:

*Remember me as you pass by,
As you are now, so once was I.
As I am now, so you must be,
Prepare for death and follow me.*

Thus begins, our Lenten journey.

A reminder that we belong – in life and in death – to Almighty God.

The whole of our journey is compressed into this Ash Wednesday worship:

The painful acknowledgement of mortality.

The sense of sadness at the reality of having to let go of all we hold dear.

The proclamation of Jesus' death on our behalf and the promised hope of resurrection.

This is what we wrestle with this Holy Season of Lent.

This is what we take to God in prayer.

Lent is an opportunity preceded by intentional choice on our part to participate in this opportunity and create space in our lives for God.

Space in which we are still long enough to hear God's voice calling us to from death to life – both in this life and the next.

This may mean abandoning old ways of doing things.
This may mean leaving behind unhealthy lifestyles.
This may mean coming to terms with our own mortality.
This may mean coming to terms with changing life circumstances.
This may mean having to choose whether we'll live for the things of this world or for God.
This may mean having to choose how we will face death.

It may mean something completely different...

The reality though is unless we spend time with God we can't hear God.

And so, we begin the Lenten Journey.

A journey not intended to berate ourselves, rather, it is a journey to be reminded that we through the great love of God for us we have been released, reconciled & redeemed.

The reality of this day is that we begin this Holy Season with a reminder of both sacrament and sign.

WE come to this table of grace to remember who feeds us.
WE come to these bowls of ash to remember who frees us.

We make the sign of the cross on forehead or hand – reminded of our own mortality & of the one who declares we will not be alone – in this life & the next.

The sign we make – the sign of the cross – is a gruesome reminder of Christ's awful death.
The sign is simultaneously AND paradoxically signifies our greatest hope.

Because Christ died, we live.

The promise is of a new and better world where there *is* no more tears and no more pain.

In this life, we will struggle ... we will suffer ... sometimes we will question God ... and that is honest faith.

It is the kind of faith which wrestles and contends with a God big enough to take it.
That is the kind of faith, I believe, we're called to bring to God in prayer.

Ring around the rosie
A pocket full of posie
Ashes / Ashes
WE all fall...

Into the arms of the One who declares – in life & in death – we belong – heart and soul – to Almighty God.

May we all fall into the security of those arms...

Amen.