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3/1/17--Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17

Nobody likes to talk about death. Nobody wants to think about death. But then here comes Ash Wednesday, a day that rubs our faces in it. Literally. We show up here to have ashes, the symbol of our mortality, smeared upon our foreheads. Ash Wednesday reminds us that we are marked by death. We are marked by death because, first of all, we are mortal creatures. The moment we are born, we are marked by death, because we will all die. We recall this in the words we say as we receive the ashes: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Death is a physical reality for each and every one of us. Accepting this reality can help us live life without taking any of it for granted. Accepting this reality of our physical deaths can help us cherish this wonderful gift. And accepting this reality can also help us remember our place in the order of things. In other words, we are not the Creator, we are not God--we are the creature.

So, physically we are marked by death. But we are also marked by death in other ways as well. The Bible and its great teachers always use that term "death" to speak about more than simply the end of our physical lives. Our biblical ancestors understood that there is more than one way to die--and that we can be overcome by deathly forces even while we are living. Call it sin, or brokenness, or alienation, or whatever you like--it amounts to living in ways that are not the life God intends for us. Of course, there are outward behaviors that are not life-affirming or life-sustaining, behaviors that cause harm to ourselves and to others: alcohol, drugs, food, cheating, stealing, killing, unfaithful behaviors in our relationships, hurtful words, and so forth. But often these stem from inward attitudes: from self-preoccupation, from anger, from injury,

from greed, pride, fear, ego. All these attitudes and behaviors are a living death. The truth is, each and every one of us is covered in ashes, in dust. Death has marked us. And all our efforts to cleanse ourselves never fully succeed. The writer of Psalm 51 pleads with God to "create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me," because they know they can't do it themselves. He or she, like us, may have tried and tried to make themselves better, only to fail in one way or another. Only God can bring about this kind of transformation. On Ash Wednesday, we face this other deathly reality--that our hearts, our minds, our attitudes, our souls, are marked by death.

But not only are we marked *by* death, but Ash Wednesday recalls that we are also marked *for* death. Do you hear that distinction? Death is not only our grim reality, it is also our calling. In our baptisms, you and I are also marked *for* death. Now that seems a little weird, so hear me out. In baptism, you and I are called to a new way of life. The Christian life. The life of following Jesus. This is not an easy life for it involves things like forgiving people who have hurt you, loving and caring about your enemies, giving your life away in service, living humbly, caring about and working for justice, welcoming the stranger--which means helping people who are not like yourself, people you may not even approve of. Following Jesus will involve a new attitude about money, possessions, success, and about yourself. So, it is not an easy road. But it is the way that brings meaningful, lasting life. All other paths lead to death. The way of Jesus leads to life.

But to follow the way of Jesus involves dying. It means letting go of the old self, the old values, the old habits, the old attitudes so that something new can be born. Baptism symbolizes this death to the old and the birth of the new. In baptism we believe we are called by God to die--to die to the old life so that we might rise to the new life.

We hear Jesus himself speak about this call to die. Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels all record Jesus saying these words to his followers: "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." In John's gospel, Jesus states that "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Now Jesus is not calling us to throw ourselves under a bus. Of course he wants us to live life, value life, cherish life. But not a false life. What he means is that we must be willing to let go of the attitudes, mindsets, behaviors, priorities and values of this world in order to know the real and abundant life he can offer us.

What Jesus is talking about is transformation. The new life that is symbolized in and through baptism is possible only when we answer the call to die. To follow Jesus involves following him on the path of dying and rising.

This is what Ash Wednesday invites us to recall. We are marked by death. Death is all around us. Death is in us. Death awaits us. And yet, the life of faith reminds us that we are also marked *for* death. We are invited to walk that path to death because God has other plans for us. God desires abundant, lasting life for us--both now while we are living and in the life beyond the grave. From ashes and dust we come. And from ashes and dust we will return. But we are not afraid of the dust or the ashes because Easter is coming, and we know what God can do with ashes.