

March 6, 2019
Ash Wednesday
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Joel 2:1-2,12-17
Psalm 103
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

It was about this time last year that I ran across an article in *The Atlantic* titled, "The App That Reminds You You're Going to Die." The article begins with this: "Five times a day for the past three months, an app called WeCroak has been telling me I'm going to die. It does not mince words. It surprises me at unpredictable intervals, always with the same blunt message: 'Don't forget, you're going to die.'"¹

The WeCroak website explains it this way:

Find happiness by contemplating your mortality.

The WeCroak app is inspired by a Bhutanese folk saying: to be a happy person, one must contemplate death five times daily.

Each day, we'll send you five invitations to stop and think about death. Our invitations come at random times and at any moment, just like death. When they come, you can open the app to reveal a quote about death from a poet, philosopher, or notable thinker.

We encourage you to take one moment for contemplation, conscious breathing or meditation. We believe that a regular practice of contemplating mortality helps us accept what we must, let go of things that don't matter and honor the things that do.²

Examples of the accompanying quotes are as follows: "The other side of the 'sacred' is the sight of your beloved in the underworld, dripping with maggots" and "the grave has no sunny corners."³ If you're inclined to skepticism, remember that this is inspired by a Bhutanese folk saying, and Bhutan is supposedly the happiest place on earth.

The Atlantic article's author expresses satisfaction with the app. She writes, "Over time, WeCroak changes the way I relate to my phone. As I scroll through Instagram or refresh Twitter, WeCroak interrupts with the sobering reminder that it is not just my attention these other apps are consuming, but chunks of my life. This was [the app developer's] ambition: Having struggled with a Candy Crush addiction, he hoped WeCroak would restore his power over his device."⁴

Sadly, my smartphone is too outdated to run WeCroak. If it could, I would have already forked over the 99 cents necessary for purchase. Fortunately for us, there's a great alternative, at least for a day. As WeCroak puts it, "Don't forget, you're going to die." As we put it, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return”: it’s something like a mantra that I have already said many times today. To state the obvious, it’s Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. Ash Wednesday here is different here than at other churches, because we offer Ashes to Go. Here, because of Ashes to Go, ashes are available not only to the adult parishioners who come out for the evening liturgy, but also to the strangers and children who show up curbside. For one day, our community’s breath and breadth expands, via the shared voicing of that unsettling mantra. Together, in the company of God and one another, we are brave enough to declare the truth that our death-denying culture would have us ignore: for every living thing, death will come; for us, death will come.

Those of us here tonight get more a little more space to break open the implications of our declaration. We might begin with the Gospel reading, which on Ash Wednesday is always the passage we just heard from Matthew. It’s easy to get stuck on the uncomfortable irony of its warning against practicing one’s piety in public, knowing that we will soon leave the church with ashes on our foreheads. If we don’t get stuck there, we hear Jesus cite what the church upholds as the core Lenten disciplines: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. He uses them to illustrate his point: that one’s religious practices should not be performance art created so that other people will take notice. Instead, one’s religious practices should be oriented toward God. We might even go so far as to say that all one’s practices, religious or otherwise, should be oriented toward God.

Today we recognize the inevitability of our death, but the point isn’t life after death; rather, it’s life until death. Ash Wednesday calls us to a life lived to its utmost fullness. As Christians we profess that a life lived to its utmost fullness is one conducted in the faith of God through Jesus Christ. For creatures of God, this must be what is most pleasing to God. Let me be clear that I don’t understand this as a finger-wagging *threat*: Get your act together, or else you will be condemned to a hellish afterlife akin to the eternal torment depicted in a Hieronymus Bosch painting. Instead, I hear a reassuring *promise*: God is with you forever. This isn’t something we have to wait for; it’s something we have *now*.

It’s common to talk about giving something up for Lent or taking something on for Lent. Neither tactic is an end, but is rather the means to an end. The goal is to clear out some debris, so that we might edge closer to God and God’s fullness. Lent is an opportunity to replace that which is life-taking, with that which is life-giving. If we notice that our life *is* being taken, then we can do something about it. It’s about Lent, but not only about Lent; it’s about eternity, for which Lent is 40 days of practice, starting *now*.

After this sermon I will say the invitation to observe a holy Lent, citing the season of Lent as a special time of preparation for the earliest Christians. That’s why we have our Inquirer’s Class during Lent. They are symbols for us of that turning to God that marks new life in Christ. That’s why our inquirers are going to help impose the ashes tonight.

As one author describes it, “Ash Wednesday exists to wake me up to the fact that the measure of my days is the relationship I have with God.”⁵

Our days *are* measured. We have only so much time. We can't delay the inevitable, but we can make the most of the days before the inevitable arrives.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” “Don't forget, you're going to die.”

Notes

¹ Bianca Bosker, “The App That Reminds You You're Going to Die,” *The Atlantic*, January/February 2018, available online at www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/01/when-death-pings/546587/ (accessed March 4, 2019).

² From the Home page of the WeCroak website, available at www.wecroak.com/ (accessed March 4, 2019).

³ Bosker.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nurya Love Parish, “The measure of our days,” *The Christian Century*, February 28, 2017, available online at www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/sundays-coming/measure-our-days-joel-21-2-12-17-matthew-61-6-16-21 (accessed March 4, 2019).