

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” The church year marches on, oblivious to world events, oblivious to our moods or our perceived tolerance for its message. Lent is late this year, but it is here now, beginning tonight with this reminder of our mortality. “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” I mentioned a week ago on Sunday that our recent Gospel readings made it feel like Lent had already begun and it was going to be extra-long this year. But really, in a way, we’ve had two years now of reminders of our mortality. Yesterday was the two-year anniversary of the first death attributed to the COVID-19 virus in the United States, and in that time some 950,000 have died in our country alone. It is estimated that we will reach 1 million by the end of the month. There have been 79 million cases of COVID reported so far, or about 23% of the population, with long-term side-effects that we’re still learning about for a significant subset of those infected. So maybe starting Lent once again under these circumstances feels a little like piling on. “Remember that I am dust, that I’m mortal, that illness and death are real? Yeah, thanks. I’ve been remembering that for two years. No reminder needed, thank you!”

Our first reading tonight, the reading we get every year on Ash Wednesday from the prophet Joel, was written at a time when the people of Judah had just suffered through a plague of locusts that wiped out their crops. They were already facing difficult times ahead, and here is Joel calling on them to “sanctify a fast.” Talk about piling on! They’re looking at a famine, and Joel is calling for a fast. But at the root of this call is confidence in God, the conviction that God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,” as we sang just a moments ago for our Gospel acclamation.

This is very much like what we are doing tonight, and the language of Joel is remarkably liturgical. “Call a solemn assembly. Gather the people...” “Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children...” In the midst of difficult times we gather to worship, to turn to God in confidence and hope, trusting the promises of God’s love and faithfulness. We don’t have a plague of locusts like the people Joel was writing to. But we are having troubles of our own that are potentially just as consequential. The pandemic is still with us, even if it is now waning and we are changing up our mitigation efforts. We are still unsure of what our new normal will look like, and our public schools are shouldering the difficult burden of being on the front lines of figuring that out. And now on top of already rising prices as a result of the past two years, we are also facing a hot war in Europe, which is creating a disruption in the supply chain of goods that we have come to depend upon, to say nothing of a humanitarian crisis of hundreds of thousands of refugees. Who could have imagined this even a couple of months ago? Yes, there have been wars and refugees for decades, but this is somehow different. Maybe it’s because it’s Europe. Maybe because they look like us. Maybe it’s because we know Ukrainians ourselves, or have a second- or third-hand connection to people who are in the midst of this right now – connections we don’t have so much with Afghanistan or Iraq, Syria or Libya, to name just a few recent examples.

With all of this weighing on our minds, we gather in solemn assembly tonight, called together by the liturgical calendar as we are every year, in good times and in bad, partly out of habit, partly out of a genuine desire to call upon God, to be met by God again in God’s means of grace, in word and sacrament. I recently ran across a quote from the British Television drama

Call the Midwife that some of you probably know and watch. Helen is a fan. It's about a nursing religious order of Anglican nuns who care for young women through their pregnancies, births, and beyond in the economically depressed East End of London. Although it focuses on their work as midwives, the religious part of their lives is often referenced. The quote in question comes from Sister Monica Joan, who is elderly in the series and bordering on dementia. Here's what she says about liturgical worship that I think is relevant to our experience: "The liturgy," she says, "is of comfort to the disarrayed mind. We need not choose our thoughts, the words are aligned, like a rope for us to cling to." That expresses nicely what I have long felt about the historic worship of the church. When done well, as a vehicle for God's promises for Jesus' sake, and a tool for drawing us out of ourselves and into God's presence and mission in the world.

In a few moments we will take hold of the rope of words aligned for us in the confession of sin. We will then have a literal in-your-face confrontation with our mortality, after which we will be handed the lifeline of the gospel in the Eucharistic prayer and the reception of Holy Communion, as we prepare to enter the season of Lent fed and nourished by the self-giving love of God in Jesus Christ.

It is true that this year of all years, in the midst of all that is swirling around us at home and abroad, we perhaps do not need the reminder of our mortality as much as we do in better times. It is already weighing us down in all sorts of unspoken ways. But tonight the liturgy gives us words and actions to both name our sin and our mortality, and to name and claim life of Christ promised to us in Holy Baptism that is the antidote and solution to sin, death and evil. You *are* dust, and to dust you shall return. But you are also Christ's. For life you are destined – on both sides of the grave – and to life you shall arise.

Cling to that rope of promise handed to you in tonight's liturgy. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.