

When I was in seminary I interned at a church in Atlanta called Holy Comforter. This parish is also my sponsor parish for ordination. You'll probably hear me talk about Holy Comforter a lot because it was one of my all time favorite communities I've ever been a part of. So a majority of the congregation lives with chronic mental health challenges which means that there is... no stigma around mental illness. In fact that it's the norm. And this also meant, that things were not quiet there. People would start talking or laughing during the services because they were not always able to control it. I found this off putting and disruptive at first, then came to really enjoy a space that made people feel welcome like that. Actually kinda miss it. One of our parishioners, Janet Davis, would often speak out during the services and rock in her chair.

My first Ash Wednesday service there, we did the classic thing, you know everyone lining up, our priest said: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Everyone is looking somber, looking down at the ground, not saying anything. And then it was Janet's turn...

Our priest said the thing, put ashes on her forehead in the sign of a cross, and said "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." and Janet without skipping a beat responded and said, "OKAY! THANKS!" Very loudly. At first I thought to myself what an odd thing to say, but upon further reflection, **Janet understood in ways that the rest of us did not**. She accepted her own mortality with an "okay" and responded with... gratitude. "Thanks"

That was actually one of the most profound things I've ever heard.

Because when we are reminded of our own mortality, we are also reminded of the life we have yet to live. No matter how much time it is, at least for today, there is breath in our lungs, and that is a gift from God.

The christian life is full of these contradictions and paradoxes.

In fact our reading from Corinthians tells us this, "We are treated as impostors, **and yet are true**; as unknown, **and yet are well known**; as dying, and see — **we are alive**; as punished, **and yet not killed**; as sorrowful, **yet always rejoicing**; as poor, **yet making many rich**; as having nothing, and **yet possessing everything**."

as dying, and see — we are alive

Is this not the secret of lent? Mystery and paradox:

Embracing your mortality is how to fully live
Through doubts and questions is how to know god
That recognizing our sin reconciles us to god and others, bringing more joy into our lives

The lenten journey is not a clear path, but more of a wandering around. In mystery and ambiguity.

And that's okay, let yourself wander the rooms and places in your heart for the next 40 days

This is what God invites us into every lent

Whether we are ready or not, lent is here. There is something about these familiar rhythms that invite us to fully live into the current season. As a church we are entering a season of preparing ourselves for easter. I love that our tradition has a season of preparation **before** the season of celebration so that we can be more present when it is time to rejoice. There will be a time to rejoice, but now is the time to journey into our own souls to find god there

Sometimes its easy to approach lent as a way to give up a bad habit or to judge ourselves because we aren't who we wish we were.

But Im reminded of the collect that we began with, it says, "almighty and everlasting God, *you hate nothing you have made.*"

You might be thinking, well that's pretty obvious, We hear all the time that God is love,, but I think there is something important here.

God doesn't add to the hatred in this world. Or the self-hatred. This is not the time to be overwhelmed by all the ways we fall short, but to rejoice in a god that journeys with us in every season. **Here's another paradox:** a day of penance is really about God's love. We can't hate ourselves into who we wish we could be, *we are loved into being.*

We are formed of the earth and to the earth we will return.
Such is the holy rhythm of life.

Every lent we journey along an old path and we don't know where it will lead, but perhaps to somewhere new. You can bring all of yourself — your fears and your doubts. Even your own discomfort around your own mortality.

Lent leads us to a place where we are confronted with our own mortality, \with ourselves, and with the brokenness of this world.

This is a difficult message to hear. That's why we have ritualized it so that we can all face this together, in the form of ashes shaped like a cross on our foreheads....

So whether you give something up, or take on something new, or do nothing at all — God is with you.

I started with a story of a parishioner at my old church named Janet. The sad part of that story is that Janet didn't make it to another ash wednesday. She had a mental

health crisis and got hit by a car and was killed. Knowing now what would happen to her makes her response even that more profound.

When those ashes were put on her forehead, she said..... “thanks”.

This lenten season, let us accept the great paradox of this christian life.

That a woman with chronic mental illness might understand the truth and mystery of God more than the rest of us

That a day of penance might actually be about God’s love

That, as corinthians says, as dying, and see — **we are alive**

The great paradox is that this touch of death that we receive on our foreheads brings us closer to God, to each other, and to the earth — WHAT IT MEANS TO BE TRULY alive

as dying, and see — **we... are.... Alive...**

What other way to respond than with thanks.