

Anniversaries and Thresholds
Ash Wednesday
March 2, 2022
The Rev. Katherine M. Bush

WS Merwin describes the sensation well. "Every year without knowing it I have passed the day / when the last fires will wave to me / And the silence will set out / Tireless traveler / like the beam of a lifeless star..." It's the opening of his poem, "For the Anniversary of my Death." How remarkable, that every year without knowing it, we pass the day that will be our last, when the last fires will have gone out. In a way, it's why we are here today because we do not know the hour or the day, so we point to a moment on the calendar when we can all gather, come together, and collectively remember that we won't be here forever. We're all short-timers.

In a thousand ways we could be reminded that one day we will die. And in a thousand ways, we refuse to register the reminder. For two years our everyday choices have been much more intertwined with our shared health and life and death. It could be that every time we pull a mask string up over our ears we consider the ramifications of disease on our fragile bodies. But mostly we don't, at least not after a while - who could bear to think about it every time? Instead, we shopped first for cute fabrics and then hustled for N95s and then grumbled or argued the merits. As conversations about putting these masks away for daily use for some, what new signs will emerge that could help us recall that the last fires will someday wave to each of us?

Masks and positivity rates and charts of late are just the most recent versions of these would-be reminders, before these we had color-coded terror threats - those rainbow charts that came on the heels of the fires and ashes of September 11. And there were other could-be signs: my children learned how to hide in storage closets in elementary school from easily accessed guns; in my own elementary years, I learned to get under my desk in case of an earthquake or a nuclear blast. My parents and grandparents and great-grandparents had their own paltry defenses against annihilating threats in their own times. And these are just the American stories and experiences, but even as we gather the day is ending in Ukraine and real bombs are falling. And one hundred years ago other wars were raging in other places; centuries ago, other diseases were spreading in other corners of the world.

And yet even with all these would-be, could-be communal reminders, so much of the time we walk through the world ignoring all of it or imagining ourselves invincible and immortal. There are other means, less widespread, that startle us out of our reverie. Often it is actually the private, individual moments that manage to pierce the veil. Irishman John O'Donohue describes those ordinary threshold moments that happen this way, "You are in the middle of your life in a busy evening, fifty things to do, and you get a phone call that somebody that you love is suddenly dying, it takes ten seconds to communicate that information. But when you put the phone down, you are already standing in a different world, because suddenly, everything that seemed so important before is all gone, and now you are thinking of this." He continues, "So the given world that we think is there, and the solid ground we [think we] are on, is so

tentative, and I think a threshold is a line which separates two territories of spirit. And I think that, very often, how we cross [that threshold], is the key thing.”

That’s what we are doing here - crossing the territory, crossing the threshold. We come to experience the liturgical phone call reminding us that the given world is so tentative. Today we learn not of a loved one’s short time remaining, but of our own. We come to claim Ash Wednesday as the stand-in for the unknown anniversary of the day when the fires will go out and there are only ashes. We do this not out of a sense of gross morbid curiosity, not to wallow in dark fascinations, but as O’Donohue says “to gather ourselves / and decide carefully / how we now can live / the life we would love / to look back on...”

Jesus didn’t attend an Ash Wednesday liturgy, but he came understanding that he was a short-timer and had only a little while, a limited amount of time to show us how to live - how to live a life we would love to look back on. He came to show us how to love and to heal and to forgive. The invitation today with its words about penitence and fasting and prayer and repentance and sin is still an invitation to decide carefully how we now can live the life we would love to look back on. It’s an invitation to cross the threshold, to move purposefully toward that tentative territory where we know the ground is not as firm as we often pretend it is. Today is an invitation to consider how fragile we are, how paltry our defenses are against all that swirls around us. Not to crush our spirits with a sense of doom, but to inspire us to decide more carefully what matters.

“Every year without knowing it I have passed the day / when the last fires will wave to me / And the silence will set out / Tireless traveler / like the beam of a lifeless star...” Today we gather on purpose, knowing this is the day we remember that at some point the last fires will wave to each of us. Today we mark our faces with these ashes because we know in the silence that we are neither invincible nor immortal. In knowing that, we know we have careful choices to make about the given world and the given time we have. We are not ignoring the signs, we are choosing to mark ourselves with the reminder that we’re short-timers here, so that we don’t live could-have-been lives, but instead we live lives we will love to look back on.

Ashes are not meant to serve as a mask of protection, they are not a closet in which to hide, nor really any kind of defense. Rather they are a reminder that we choose to heed of our fragility. These ashes are an invitation to honor our brief time here by setting things to right, to follow Jesus in loving and healing and forgiving, to decide carefully how we now can live the life we would love to look back on.