

ASH WEDNESDAY, 2021.

If you start at the south end of the Appalachian trail and start hiking, after a little bit you get to a shop that is there expressly to correct your packing. At this point, you've loaded up your pack with the stuff you thought you would need. And as you've started the journey, you've realized pretty quickly that some of that expensive gear that looked so enticing online isn't really what you need out in the wilderness. So an employee comes over and you dump everything out on the ground, and then they go through it with you, separating into piles: the essentials, stuff that might come in handy if you end up with enough room for it, and the expensive junk that is weighing you down. That last pile is not only stuff that you can do without, it is stuff that you need to get rid of. It is heavy when you have a long way to go; it takes up space that would better be filled by something you would use every day.

I'm thinking about that shop this Ash Wednesday and this Lent. Ash Wednesday reminds us that no matter what, we will die, and that we are sinners. But the purpose is not to make us miserable. It is instead to help us to look honestly at our life as we prepare for Holy Week and Easter. God saves us at Easter, but only our true selves can be saved. Of course we all rely on comfortable deceits and convenient omissions to get us through a world that seems full of sharp elbows. But these deceits and omissions grow until they are a mask that we hide behind. They build up in front of and around us until we can neither see nor be seen through them. But the person we pretend to be cannot be saved. God comes to save the battered, sometimes broken, tender, messed up and messing up person we really are.

This year we have been surrounded by death in a way most of us have never been before. And maybe, like me, you aren't sure that you need another reminder of death. We've tracked its work for a year. We've felt it stalking us through the grocery store. It has bound us up in our homes and shrunk our world and our lives. This year we don't need to be pulled down from forbidden heights and reminded that we are not immortal. Ash Wednesday doesn't just want to remind us that we will die; it wants to do so only to point us back toward our own lives. And maybe especially in a plague year, with so much death, we need this pointing back toward the truth of our lives. We have not had access recently to the lie that we are immortal, but when so much of the world is so hard, we may have relied on a million smaller lies all the more.

And beyond the little deceits that we might build up to protect ourselves, we also tend over time just to accrue stuff. I don't mean material things, but habits and reflexes and patterns of thinking that we didn't necessarily choose, but that were either forced on us or just glommed onto us. And then we carry that around, and it becomes a part of how we are in the world.

We are moving toward new life. We are moving toward Easter and toward the end of the pandemic, and God is moving toward us to save us. This Lent gives us a chance to dump out all that stuff we have been carrying around, to look honestly at our lives: where we're headed, what we're bringing with us, what we actually need and what is only burdening us. Ash Wednesday forces us to look long and hard at ourselves, really to reckon with what we need and what we don't. Throwing away some of that stuff that we picked up along the way is hard. But doing that hard work now will make our journey toward new life easier in the long run. This Lent, let's unpack and repack. Let's remember who we really are. So that when new life dawns in the distance, we can run to greet it. Amen.