

Sunday, February 26
9:00 & 11:00am



“You are Dust”

February 26, 2023 | First Sunday in Lent
Charlie Berthoud | Genesis 3:19

I’ve learned that as people get older, they read the obituaries. So I was reading some obituaries this week. Most are somber, but I found some that are a bit unusual.

A 68 year-old Virginia woman who died in mid 2016 had in her obituary: “Faced with the prospect of voting for either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton, Mary Anne chose to pass into the eternal love of God.”

An 83 year-old Connecticut woman died after a lifetime of joking around, lots of pets, and tall tales, so she included in her obit:

“She passed away while climbing Mount Kilimanjaro.... Her daughter, Donna, her dog, Mia, and her cats came along at the last minute. There is suspicion that Mrs. Brewer died from hypothermia, after Mia ate Mrs. Brewer’s warm winter boots and socks.”

A 68 year-old New Hampshire man who died in 2019 was known as a joker, so his two daughters had some fun with his obituary:

He was "a kid from Brooklyn who grew up to live the American Dream of marriage, a career, a house in the suburbs and two pain in the ass kids. He attended Bishop Ford High School."

The obituary continued, referencing his favorite TV show and a peculiar habit:

"His love of 'Doctor Who' was only surpassed by his love of not wearing pants at home. He often combined these two interests."

With gratitude for those who can make us smile, we wade into the deep waters of pondering death and life, with our new Lenten sermon series.

The humor helps, as death is a topic we like to avoid. Most of us don't want to talk about death, and sometimes we think we're never going to die.

I remember a delightful couple in a former church. Both were kind and gracious and faithful church-goers. One of them was about 94 and the other was 92. The older one was in the hospital, nearing the end of life. I remember speaking with the 92 year old who was saddened and shocked by the news. I remember her saying several times, something like: "I can't believe this is happening; he's been healthy his whole life."

In my head I was thinking "he's 94, what is she expecting?" Obviously I didn't say that to her, but it did show how easy it is for us to not really face the reality that we're all going to die one day.

Everyone here is going to die one day.

While we don't want to obsess about death, we need to be mindful of it and do what we can to prepare for it. So we're going to be talking about death and life over this holy season of Lent, as we reflect on the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Our scripture lesson for today is short and sweet, from the first book of the Bible, in the creation story. God says to Adam and Eve:

You are dust,
and to dust you shall return.

From this verse, we get the funeral liturgy of ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

And interestingly, as my Hebrew Bible professor noted, it's one of those very rare times when a wordplay can be translated.

In Hebrew we read about how the first human Adam is made from earth of dust, with the Hebrew word being Adamah.

In English we could say that the human comes from the humus (dirt) and returns to the dirt. There's your biblical language lesson for the day.

The season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday every year, a day when Christians become mindful of the 40 days until Easter and the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem, where he faced betrayal, arrest, and execution, and then resurrection.

The symbolism of ashes is rich. Not only do they remind us of our mortality and of the death of Jesus, they also invite us into a spirit of repentance for our sins—dying to sin and rising to new life.

Many Christians get marked with ashes on Ash Wednesday, and the traditional liturgy says: “You are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Due to snow and ice, we cancelled our Ash Wednesday service, but we have ashes here today, and at the conclusion of the service, for those who are interested we can put a small ashen cross on your hand or your forehead.

As we put ashes on the hands and heads of anyone who so desires, we will be mindful that we are dust, and we’ll say to you: “In life and in death, you belong to God.”

The ashes remind us that we are dust and will return to dust. The ashes remind us that we are God’s beloved children, now and forever.

Along with the theological affirmation that in life and death we belong to God, there are practical considerations—things we don’t often talk about.

Last year we had a sermon series called “Let’s Talk About Sex,” followed by a Lenten series called “Let’s Talk About Jesus.” I almost titled this series “Let’s Talk About Death.”

Talking and pondering and wrestling with complicated issues is hard, but important. So to help spur those conversations, I want to offer some food for thought for the next month.

The big question to ponder: If you were to die tomorrow, are you ready? I know that’s rather blunt, but again the reality remains that we’re all going to die one day. Have you thought about this and have you discussed it with loved ones?

For today, I want to think about three areas of readiness.

1. Your body

What's going to happen with your body when you die? Burial? Cremation? Organ donation? If you know the answer, do your loved ones? And is it written down somewhere?

Early in my ministry, I officiated at the wedding of a good-hearted young couple, a few years younger than me. He was an electrician and she was a teacher. Tragically, he died a few months later in a work accident.

After his death, his wife and his mother weren't sure if he had wanted to be buried or cremated. One thought burial and one thought cremated. They weren't arguing but they weren't sure, and that caused a lot of sadness. I don't even remember what was finally decided, but I do remember how the uncertainty made a tragic situation worse.

When someone dies and their loved ones know their desires, that's one less thing that grieving people have to worry about.

There are lots of good options. Most funeral homes are excellent, and I've had good experiences with all of them in our area. We have a columbarium here at church, and we're expanding it next month. And we have several families that now have loved ones at Natural Path Sanctuary, a simple and environmentally friendly destination for a body.

We are among the many people who have "organ donor" on our driver's licenses, and I'm actually exploring donating my body to the medical school. I've thought about it for years but never did anything until this week, when I've learned that I need to register for this before I die.

2. Your affairs

Perhaps you've seen the stereotypical movie scene when the doctor enters the room with a somber look and she asks the patient "are your affairs in order?"

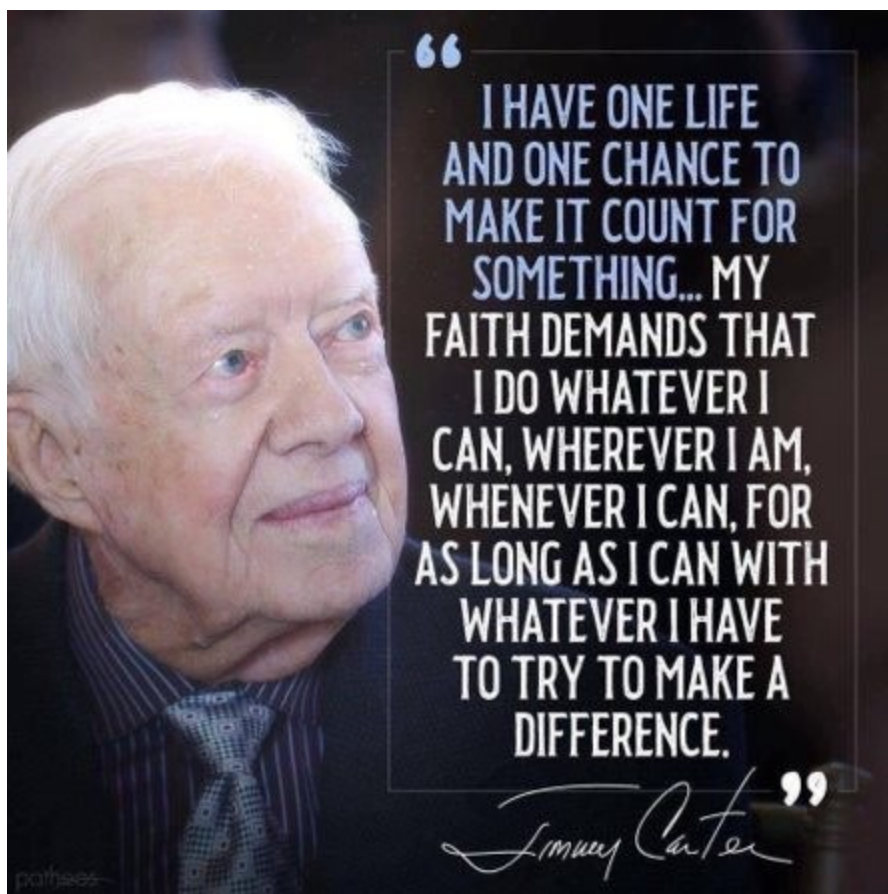
Ideally our affairs would be in order throughout our lives, but for most of us life is busy and chaotic and we procrastinate. Nonetheless it's important to do what we can to organize our finances and our possessions and such to make things easier for our loved ones when the time comes.

A year and a half ago, when our youngest child was packing for college, we were in the basement getting him a suitcase and a duffel bag. Our basement has a fair amount of stuff in it, some of it comes from deceased loved ones and much of it is our accumulated “stuff.” I said to Matthew, “If your mom and I get hit by a bus next week, you and your brother will presumably be sad for a week or two, and then you’ll be frustrated with us because you’ll have to deal with all this stuff.”

Since then, Chris and I have made some progress in the basement, but probably not enough.

This season is as good a time as any to do what you can to get your affairs more orderly.

Your loved ones will thank you.



3. Your legacy

We need to think about our body, our affairs, and also our legacy.

How will we be remembered? What kind of difference are we making? How are we doing in our own unique ways of using our unique gifts and circumstances and history to faithfully live our lives and hopefully make this world a better place?

Former President Jimmy Carter is nearing the end of life, regardless of his politics he seems to have exemplified a good and faithful and decent life. He's leaving a legacy that will inspire many. The quote in the bulletin is an honest reflection of his life.

I heard a report on the radio this week about Carter's initiative to put solar panels on White House and to encourage us to wear sweaters and turn our thermostats down in winter. If we had listened to him, maybe we wouldn't have had to have our recent sermon series on creation care, as maybe we wouldn't be dealing with global climate crisis.

When I think about legacies, I come back to the story of Alfred Nobel, the man who invented dynamite and made a lot of money because of it. In 1888, his brother died, and it was mistakenly reported that Alfred had died. One French newspaper had a headline "the merchant of death is dead."

Alfred Nobel was obviously disturbed by this headline, realizing he would be remembered as "the merchant of death" unless something changed. So he essentially rewrote his legacy.

When he actually did die several years later, he willed most of his money toward what we know as the Nobel Prizes, the most famous of which is the Nobel Peace Prize.

While some people know Alfred Nobel invented dynamite, he is mostly known as an advocate for literature, science, and peace. The obituary error was a wake up call, giving him a second chance at thinking about his legacy. <https://www.history.com/news/did-a-premature-obituary-inspire-the-nobel-prize>

How about you? What do you want in your obituary? How do you want to be remembered? What will be your legacy?

I want to close today by talking about my dad and how his sudden death woke me up and, in a way, gave me a second chance to think about God and life and purpose.

In December 1995 my mom called to tell me that my dad had died, in his sleep in Europe, on the last night of a group trip. I was stunned and sad. He was 72. My poor mother had to deal with the sadness of death and all the issues of getting a body cremated and back through customs.

I was a young pastor at the time, and our home church pastor asked if I wanted to help with the memorial service, but I declined, still stunned and sad.

At the service the pastor shared words from Psalm 90.

The psalm begins with a sense of time, of eternity: “Before the mountains were brought forth, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.”

The psalm continues reminding us of our mortality: “You turn us back to dust.”

After acknowledging the reality of our death, the psalmist prays for awareness: “Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.”

Then the psalm closes with a reminder of God’s ever-present steadfast love, and a prayer that we might be useful and make good use of whatever time we have: “Satisfy us with your steadfast love and prosper our hands.”

So ever since then the vast majority of my prayers have begun with “Thank you God for the gift of today.”

And I include some sort of prayer that I would make good use of the time I have. Because I’m forgetful, I’ve built some reminders into my daily routines.

- When I get out of bed, if I’m not too tired, I try to thank God for the gift of a new day.
- When I put on my watch, I often pray: Help me God to make good use of the time today.
- As I put on my clothes, I usually pray that God would clothe me with compassion, kindness and love.
- I put on my ring and I pray to be a good spouse and good father.

- As I put on my cross, I pray for the courage and humility to be a faithful follower of Jesus.

Friends, life is good. But it is short. God has blessed us with the gift of life, the gift of today. Let's make the most of the time.

This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

With an honest awareness of the reality of the bad news of death, we can really live as people of good news, people of faith, hope, and love.

Let us pray.

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
You turn us back to dust
and say, "Turn back, you mortals."
For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past
or like a watch in the night.
You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.
For we are consumed by your anger;
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.
You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.
For all our days pass away under your wrath;
our years come to an end like a sigh.*

*The days of our life are seventy years
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.
Who considers the power of your anger?
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.
So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.
Turn, O Lord! How long?
Have compassion on your servants!
Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us
and as many years as we have seen evil.
Let your work be manifest to your servants
and your glorious power to their children.
Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands! (Psalm 90)*