



Sunday, February 18, 2026
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 (Ash Wednesday)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompañado

One of the things that always catches me about this day is that we begin the season of Lent by looking to the end. But it's not just any generic ending, it's *your* ending, and it's *my* ending that mark the beginning of this new season and why we center ourselves on the words "*Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*"

Those words connect us between a dusty beginning, "*Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground*", and a dusty ending, "*earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*"

We can talk about our beginning – where it happened, when it happened, and who was there. But our ending – when, and where, and how it will happen, and who will be there – none of us knows. We can't know. But one thing *we do know* is that the reality of our ending is always in front of us.

Recently, I was driving home from a funeral, when I was overcome by the thought that later this year I'll be turning 52. And while there's nothing particularly significant about 52, it just means that I'm inching closer to my ending than my beginning. It was one of those thoughts that took hold of me and wouldn't let go.

Then a few days later I was reading an email from the synod office informing pastors that our yearly reports were due to the Bishop and also reminding all rostered ministers to file their funeral planning information with the Bishop's office. Something about this just screamed, "*Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*"

From the day that we're born there's a presence that accompanies us. It's our constant companion, invisible and yet always present. Regardless of who we are or where we go, it goes with us. This unwanted and unwelcome companion is named death. And today we mark ourselves with the ashes of mortality, a visible sign of our invisible companion.

However, it would be a mistake to think that death comes only at the end of our physical life. Death meets us all along our journey in various forms. And it's in *those* moments that we experience the fragility and uncertainty of life. At some level all fear is rooted in the fear of death. Death makes itself known in broken relationships, failures, shattered dreams, and lost opportunities. Death often hides itself in our regrets and disappointments. We recognize death's presence in those times when we betray ourselves and live contrary to who we truly are or want to be.

If you've ever known grief, then you've gazed into the face of death. Each funeral we attend, especially when it's for someone our age or younger, reminds us that everyone dies, and that we too one day will die. I wonder if that's why some people dislike celebrating birthdays.

We can try to forget, ignore, or deny death but no one escapes a final ending. But here's my question. What if escaping death isn't the heart of the issue? I sometimes wonder if we've not only missed the point of Lent but maybe even missed the point of the gospel.

Perhaps Lent and the gospel of Jesus aren't primarily about being good – changing from a bad person to a good person, so we can get a future reward.

Don't get me wrong, I've got nothing against being a good person, *whatever that means*, but I don't remember ever reading where Jesus said, "I came that you might be good, better, or an improved version of yourself."

What I have read is that Jesus said, "*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*" Throughout the gospels he shows himself to be giving life, revealing life, and calling us into life. And that's not about tomorrow, after you die, or some heavenly future. ***Life is now.***

And yet, how many of us grew up being taught to keep ourselves focused on the promise and hope of life after death and living forever? I did. It's what I wanted and sometimes I still do. For many of us life after death was, and maybe still is, the central focus and purpose of faith, Jesus, and the Church. But the older I get and the more I experience, the more urgent life *before* death becomes.



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Is there life in my marriage? In my parenting? In my ministry? In my friendships? Is there life in the way I'm living in *this* moment? Is there life in the way I see the world and relate to others? Am I growing? Am I bringing life to others? Is there life in me *even* as I stand before death? And if there's not, then why not? What needs to change, to be let go of, or to be done differently? But those aren't just questions for me. They're for all of us.

What if life before death is really what Lent is about? What if life before death is really what the ashes are pointing us to? What does life before death mean *for* you and what does it offer *to* you?

Yes, life may be limited by death, but it's not cancelled out by death.

Think about it like this. Death is the frame around the picture of our life. It simply holds in front of us the truth of what is. It focuses our attention. It intensifies and prioritizes what really matters. That this life doesn't last forever doesn't *diminish* life's value, it *gives* it value. The temporary nature of life means that *this one moment, this now*, is priceless. There will never be another moment like this one.

The preciousness of life means that we are of infinite value to God and the world.

In the beginning when "God formed man from the dust of the ground" the very next thing God does is to "breathe into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."

The question behind today's ashes isn't whether you will die, or what you will give up or do for Lent, or how to improve yourself. The question is, "How will you live before death?"

So then what if our Lenten practice this year was to reclaim our life? It's what I want...and I suspect that's what you want too.

What would it be like to reclaim the things that give you the abundant life God promises? And not just for ourselves but so we can offer our life back to God and the people in our life. What if we let the ashes with which we've been marked today be less about our ending and more about a new beginning. Less about where we've been and more about where we are going. Less about who we've been and more about who we are becoming.

I think the poet Mary Oliver captures this beautifully in her poem "When Death Comes." She writes:

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

My friends, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." Amen.