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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

February 18, 2026

All Years, Ash Wednesday, Revised Common Lectionary

[Joel 2:1-2,12-17](#)

[Psalm 103 or 103:8-14](#)

[2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](#)

[Matthew 6:1-6,16-21](#)

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A few days ago, I found myself contemplating my mortality. It came out of nowhere — I was folding clothes, and all of a sudden it hit me: my life will end. At some point, my breath will stop, this body will be dead, and this life I’m living right now will be over. For good. Because the arrow of time only moves one way.

These moments have been happening more often since I turned forty. The forties are a midpoint decade. I’m not old yet, but I’m not really young anymore either. I may or may not have reached the actual halfway point of my life, but chances are I’m pretty close. It feels different than it did when I was eight, or eighteen, or even twenty-eight, and could take being in the first half of life for granted.

Friends in their fifties, sixties, seventies, and eighties tell me they know this experience well, and feel it even more keenly as the years seem to pass quicker and quicker. “Inside I feel like I’m still the very same person I was at twenty-two,” one friend told me. “But I don’t recognize him in the mirror anymore.”

I don't like imagining being dead. Maybe it's not good to admit that, as a priest. Maybe I'm supposed to be full of joyful conviction that the end of this life is nothing more than a momentary passing into radiance and bliss. But the truth is I'm scared of dying. And on this day, I think it's OK to just sit with that. Sometimes people of faith can leap too quickly to assurances of heaven — "She's in a better place," we might say, to which a very honest answer might be, "Maybe, maybe not, but I wish she was still here with me."

I remember a seminary professor who shocked my first-year divinity class by saying, "When you're dead, you're dead." To our protests about life and heaven and eternity, he pointed out that the immortality of the soul isn't really a biblical idea so much as one from the philosophy of Plato. The Hebrew Scriptures don't see human beings primarily as immortal souls temporarily inhabiting a physical body. They see us as physical bodies dignified by God with the breath of life. We are dust, and to dust we shall return.

Our professor wasn't trying to send us into hopeless depression. As he later explained, if God can make us alive once, God can do it again. He was trying to jar us out of our denial. We all like to pretend death isn't real, and we can use faith as an excuse for that. But what we believe in as Christians isn't immortality — it's resurrection. Resurrection is the raising up of the dead. And to get there, we have to be dead first.

So today we are reminded of our mortality: *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

We are reminded today not only that we are mortals, but also that we are sinners. In a few minutes we will pray a Litany of Penitence that tries to cover the whole range of the ways we fall short of God's purpose — from brutal violence to minor but exquisite interpersonal pettiness, with participation in systemic injustice and collective neglect of creation along the way. We will name that we are sinners, and we will put ourselves in God's gracious hands to forgive. Which God does.

And then these beloved foreheads of ours will be traced with the sign of the cross. The sign of our salvation; a sign of solidarity with one who came among us as a fellow dust creature, who lived the life of a friend and servant of all, who gave himself to a death of futility and shame, and who through that death transformed our own death into a gateway to unexpected life.

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Today we tell the truth about ourselves. We are dust on our way to dust, and we might as well look that truth right in the face. We are all human. We are all sinners. We will all die. And the truth may perhaps set us free.

We are God's beloved dust. And for today, that is enough.