

## Ash Wednesday 2026

Now that I'm 70, I've been searching my memory lately, about a lot of things. In particular, how I have been formed by the church... my life as a layperson... my life as a priest. Lately Bob Gaines has been on my mind. Bob Gaines was a good friend of mine. He's been dead for almost fifteen years. I knew Bob long before I was ordained to the priesthood. I served with him on the Standing Committee of the diocese; we were lay deputies to the general convention together. Bob was sort of the elder statesman of the diocese. He was a lawyer in Pensacola, most of his professional life, but he grew up in Mobile. He served as the chancellor for the diocese for many years.... He was one of those wise souls... a man of few words, but words always well chosen.... When Katharine and I first moved to Mobile we bought a house on Texas Street, just two blocks that way.... And at a diocesan gathering Bob asked me where we lived... and I told him... Oh, he said... I have a lot of friends near you... they are buried in Magnolia cemetery.

"In the midst of life we are in death," the psalmist writes.... Indeed, that is the tension in which we all live, if we are paying attention.... The older we get, it seems, the more we are compelled to pay attention. Ash Wednesday is one of the rare occasions that we speak of our mortality... when we take account of the reality that we all die.... Ash Wednesday is also about repentance; and I want to say that repentance is, at its heart, about taking account...making a conscious decision to pay attention.... To the wise self, the wisdom within, and to the world around us. This is the season in the church when we repent of our sins; but

the writers of scripture aren't speaking of the individual false choices we make when speaking of sin. They are speaking of sin as corporate, structural; sin that embeds itself in our institutional lives; sin that makes its home within our cultural predispositions and biases. So I would propose that repentance has very much to do with naming the injustices of our world; owning the truth of them; and imaginatively speculating as to a remedy.... And connected to these things, one thing perhaps most worthy of our attention is that of all the things that make us brothers and sisters in this sojourn we call life... it is the fact that we all die.... There is profound empathy in that awareness... and empathy is perhaps what our world needs most right now.

I would propose that without the reality of death in the midst of life, our time on earth would be flat, sterile and meaningless... perhaps in God's mythic mind, God's understanding of the created order, death is the means of poignant contrast by which we apprehend the utter beauty and abundance of this short life. That is what the passage of Job which we just read is all about. The profound terror of the created order... and its utter beauty and mystery. "Death is the mother of beauty," the great Wallace Stevens proclaims in his poem, *Sunday Morning*... a poem suited for Ash Wednesday. We spend so much of our lives trying, in vain, to carve out something of permanence.... But for God nothing is permanent. God is all about change and transformation... the old is always passing away... the old passes away making way for the new. Death and rebirth, the hard and mysterious, rhythmic truth.

I mean to say that death is not the enemy, nor is it the punishment for sin... but a natural and gracious means by which we rest finally from our labors of bearing God's life to the world around us.... Yielding our legacy to new life.

So what that means for us, the people of faith, is that we spend this brief moment of our lives making outward and visible the beauty and abundance that so graciously enriches our time on earth, the beauty and abundance that guilds the fleeting process of time... and that means that our sole purpose here is to love... because love is the outward and visible sign of beauty, and love is stronger than death.... Love never dies, and Love must always be given away.... Some would call that an ambiguity... but there is no ambiguity about death, and there is no ambiguity about love. I would call this a creative tension, a holy mystery, in which we live and move and have our being.... Our vocation is to Love amidst the ashes, and what we have named as the brokenness of existence... As the world passes away, the love we share lives forever, and redeems and restores... that is why we can say with authority that we make our song, even at the grave... without the reality of death, I'm not so sure we could know the power of love.... So in the midst of a world passing away, amid the living and the dead... amid the dust and ash, we make our song of love, because that is our witness, that for which we were born... our witness that love is stronger than death... that always new life germinates in the ashes... carry that hope this Holy Lent... carry that hope always.