

Human beings are story beings. For as long back as we can remember we have been listening to stories around fires or radios or TV screens. We make sense of the world through stories: fairy tales teach us the rules of good behavior; our political views are rooted in the stories we tell about how the world is and how it should be; the gospel is the story by which we seek to live our lives.

We also tell stories about ourselves in order to understand who we are and what we want to be. Sometimes the stories we tell about ourselves can be harmful: someone might tell herself, "I'm not good enough," so often that she can't get passed her insecurity, and she needs to learn to tell herself a different story. We can tell ourselves encouraging stories, like when someone tells himself, "You are doing enough, so stop comparing yourself to others." We tell ourselves the story of who we want to be, of our goals and hopes for the future, and these stories give us encouragement and help us make decisions.

Of course we also hear stories about who we are and who we should be from other people and from the culture we live in. Through TV shows, advertisements, songs, and newspaper articles, we constantly receive messages about what a good human should be like. Women hear about exactly how we should be beautiful; men hear about how they should be strong. We all hear that we should be perfectly kind and successful in our work but also spend a lot of time with our families and also be rich and of course be happy all the time. Sometimes it feels like we're hearing: you need to be all things to all people, and you need to enjoy doing it.

Then we come to worship today, Ash Wednesday, and we hear a different story. We hear the story God tells about us.

First, we hear that we are limited. We hear that we are imperfect, sinful. We hear that we are mortal: our bodies will get weak; we will die.

Does gathering to hear those stories come as kind of a relief to anyone else?

Here is a sacred place where we can lay down all the pressure that is put on us to be perfect. Here is a sacred place where we can lay down our pretenses and our strivings and our performing, a sacred place where we can admit for a moment how we feel sometimes: not good enough. Not able to be perfect. Worn out sometimes, selfish sometimes, hypocritical sometimes.

Here is a sacred place where we can acknowledge our fear of dying, of losing those we love; a sacred place where we can acknowledge our frustration with the frailty of our bodies, our grief for those who have died or whose bodies are hurting or minds are fading.

Most of us hide away all that vulnerability most of the time: because it's not polite conversation, or because it's painful to talk about. But today we gather to be marked with a reminder of it all: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return."

For this moment we can admit together all our weakness and vulnerability, and it is good, it is true, it is honest.

But to stop the story there would not only be a recipe for a very depressing day: it would be wrong. Our sin and our frailty are only the first part of the story God tells about us. The story we will act out in the ritual of being marked with a cross of ashes will continue as we gather around the table for Holy Communion.

Today we hear not only that we are mortals and sinners but also that we are beloved, forgiven, sainted children of God. God sees us exactly as we are — sees us even more clearly than we see ourselves — and God chooses us exactly as we are. Jesus Christ came for us exactly as we are. God welcomes us into God's kingdom exactly as we are.

First we hear, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return." And then we hear, "The body of Christ, given for you." / "The blood of Christ, shed for you."

On Ash Wednesday we hear the story of who God says we are. We hear that we are vulnerable and sinful. Then we hear that God loves us as we are. And, finally, we hear that God does not leave us as we are.

When we hear that, we may think first of God's law, which convicts us when we do wrong or fail to do right, which holds us to God's standard. We may also think of the vision of the Kingdom of God, the vision we get through the words and lives of Jesus, the prophets, and the saints: the stories of the Kingdom of God help us see how God is working to transform our world and call us to be a part of that work.

But most of all we should remember that we are not called to repent and to change and to work all on our own — that would eventually lead us back to the first part of the story, our imperfections, and leave us stranded there. This third part of the story is not about what we are striving to do: it is about what the Holy Spirit is doing in us. God holds all of our weakness and transforms it into something new; God takes on even our mortality and with it creates new life.

As we enter into the season of Lent, pay attention to the ways God is transforming you now. What fear may God help you make peace with? What grief may God help you make beautiful? What weaknesses may God turn into to strengths?

Listen to the story God is telling about you. Listen to the story God is writing in you. Let that be the story you tell yourself, too.