

It's been a challenging year, to say the least. And it's been said over and over, I know. But today is, what I would argue, one of the most important days in our church year, not because it's on par with days like Christmas or Easter, but because it comes just at the time when we need it most. It is, of course, Ash Wednesday. I used to think this was a day to simply remember that we're mortal, finite creatures. Kind of morbid, actually. But I've since come to love this day because it may be that no other day holds the truth of our lives and the truth of who God is in balance more than this day. I believe Ash Wednesday is beautiful. Through ashen crosses, we remember that God brings life out of even the darkest of times. We remember that all is being made beautiful. All is being made new.

I was once an intern hospital chaplain at the University of Minnesota. As part of the internship, you were responsible for being on call for at twice a week throughout the summer, meaning, that if anything happened or if anyone needed to speak to a chaplain, you were the only one available. Oddly enough, I went through the entire summer without getting called in. That is, until the final day I was on call.

The pager went off at 2 in the morning and my heart sank. You always know this is part of the job, but it still never ceases to generate the sickening feeling in your stomach because you know that no one ever calls for a chaplain at 2am to just talk. Sure enough, there was a family who was gathered with a middle aged woman who was going to be removed from life support and they wanted someone to pray with them.

So I hurriedly got dressed, trying to look somewhat presentable at such an early hour, when my pager rang again. My heart started racing even more, hoping that it was just an update on the previous message. But deep down, you knew that wasn't it. I checked the pager again. Sure enough, it was another call for a chaplain. An elderly man who had been suffering from kidney failure. No family. No friends. Just the nurses and hospital staff who had cared for him and loved him all these months.

So I begin to make the drive into downtown, all the while praying desperately that God give me some kind of word of hope and comfort for this family, for this man. I reach the parking garage and no sooner have I parked when the pager goes off a third time. I hesitate for a moment, before finally mustering the courage to see the new message on my pager. My heart shatters. Neonatal intensive care. Stillborn. First-time parents. And I just feel numb, like the weight of the brokenness of life has hit me full force and all I can do is be tossed around by it.

I take a moment for a deep breath. I hadn't realized how shallow my breathing was until I finally breathed again. It was that kind of breath that almost stings a little as you take it in, but it feels so refreshing at the same time. I made my way into the first hospital room, meeting with the

family of the woman on life support. And then it's all a blur. I don't remember much about that moment. But I remember the family. I remember their faces as they cried and tried to hold back tears, I remember the laughter that filled the room as they shared memories and stories, and I remember sharing hugs with each person in that room. I remember that it was beautiful.

I now stand in front of the elevator, moving on to the next floor to meet with some nurses as they said goodbye to their newly found friend, an older gentleman whose kidneys had failed. And time began to warp again and I don't remember all that was said and done. But I remember him. I remember the nurses. I remember how time seemed to freeze as nurses from all over the unit crowded into this tiny room. I remember every hand joined together as we said the Lord's Prayer. I remember how each one took a turn to say goodbye to their friend, marking the sign of the cross on his forehead. And I remember, it was beautiful.

Once again, I stand in front of the silver elevator doors and my heart and mind began to pace again, my palms sweating uncontrollably. Once again, I take a deep breath and made my way into the room. There was mom in the bed, eyes and nose red from the heavy crying; dad sitting in a chair next to her, head down, holding her hand, though both hardly have the energy to hold it tight; and there, at the foot of the bed, lay their son, still and quiet, no life exuding from him. I don't remember a lot about that moment either. But I remember them. I remember their son. Henry. That was his name. I remember they asked for Henry to be baptized. And I remember the look on the faces of those two young parents – a mixture of sadness and heartbreak, but with a hint of joy and hope and assurance in the promises of the God of life. And I remember, even in that dark moment, there was a light. And it was beautiful.

I think about that evening every Ash Wednesday because it's the only way I can make sense of it all. It was a night full of ashes. And it was also a night full of life and beauty and hope. And it's what I love about this day. Contrary to common belief, I don't think Ash Wednesday is a day to simply remember we're all going to die someday. That hasn't been my experience. It's a day for truth and truth telling – about ourselves, about one another, and about God. Yes, we are finite creatures. Yes, this life is filled with hurt and pain and suffering. Ash Wednesday challenges us to face those realities head on. But out of the ashes, something beautiful comes. Out of the ashes, we are reminded of what God does with brokenness and pain and suffering and death. God raises. Out of brokenness and hurt and suffering and death, raises us up, and breathes life into us again. Because life is beautiful. We are dust and to dust we shall return. But God loves dust. And God always does something amazing and beautiful with dust, until it comes alive once again. A Blessed Ash Wednesday to you, my dusty friends. You are

amazing. You are beautiful. You are being made new. Thanks be to
God. Amen.