

## “It’s a Good Day to Die.”

In the 1970 movie *Little Big Man*, Old Lodge Skins is an aging Cheyenne warrior who’s decided that it’s time for him to die. And so he climbs to the top of a nearby mountain and makes his preparations. And when the time is right, he declares “This is a good day to die,” and then he lies down on the ground and waits for death to take him.

He waits for quite a while. Eventually, he feels a drop of rain on his face. And then another. Sighing, the old man opens his eyes, and gets up, and heads back down the mountain. “I was afraid of this,” he says, as he returns to his home. “Sometimes the magic works. Sometimes it doesn’t.”

Well, today is Ash Wednesday — the beginning of the Season of Lent — and, if you will, it’s “a good day to die.”

But I want to assure you that I’m talking about a different sort of death than what Old Lodge Skins was hoping for. And assure you that this sort of death has nothing to do with magic, but has everything to do with grace; with *God’s* grace.

Every year, as I prepare for this day, I’m struck by the *similarities* between our 40 days of Lent, and the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness, and the 40 years the Hebrew people spent wandering in the wilderness.

But I’m also struck by the *differences*. For the time that Jesus spent in the wilderness began with his baptism in the Jordan. And the time the Hebrew people spent in the wilderness, began with their passing through the Red Sea. The presence of water links those two events, and in both cases, that water is symbolic of birth — the birth of a ministry for Jesus, and the birth of a nation for the Hebrew people.

But *our* 40 days, *our* Lenten experience, begins differently. There is no water involved, and there are no symbols of new life or birth. In fact, we begin our season with something that symbolizes just the opposite:

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

These are the words that Fr. Jeff and I will be saying in a few minutes at the Imposition of Ashes. And as it turns out, similar words are said by a minister at a funeral:

“... we commit this body to the ground; earth to earth,  
ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

The connection between the Ash Wednesday liturgy and the funeral liturgy sobers me, and makes this a hard day for me. And the hardest part of this service is when I smudge the palm-ash upon your foreheads, because

I don't like to be reminded of death, especially when it comes to the people I care about and love.

I don't like to be reminded that there are forces in this world that are beyond my control.

I don't like being reminded that there are limits to what I can accomplish.

I don't really like this day, because if I took it seriously, I'd have to admit that I'm not as strong or as smart as I'd like to think. And those aren't thoughts I like to entertain.

However, and on a somewhat lighter note, did you hear the story of the innovative, young minister who was always trying new things. One year, he decided to try something new on Ash Wednesday. Tired of the routine of smudging a little palm-ash on his parishioners' foreheads, he decided instead to sling a shovelful of the black ash across the congregation. Needless to say, this was something they had never seen before. And one parishioner, who was particularly horrified by this turn of events, was heard to remark, “This is a terrible imposition.”

So, as I mentioned before, the season of Lent doesn't begin with signs or symbols of new life or birth. It begins, rather, with a symbol of death. And that's the point! Because throughout this season, we're going to be reminded that it's only when we die that we'll be in a position to receive what God wants to give us. Because God is ultimately in the business of raising the dead, and not the living.

And so, Lent reminds me that I must die — metaphorically speaking, of course.

I have to die to my attempts to be self-sufficient.

I have to die to my desire to be powerful, and in control of my world.

I have to die, in other words, to my hopes to be like God.

And then, and only then, when I'm finally good and dead, can God take up the reins of my life.

And do you know what? This gives me hope! And it's this hope that allows me to put a smudge of palm-ash on the foreheads of my family and friends, because I know that death is not the end; but rather, in the kingdom of God, it's just the beginning.

And so, this is what the season of Lent means to me:

It's a season when we can practice the spiritual discipline of "letting go and letting God."

It's a season when we put our faith to the test, and learn once more that God can succeed where we have failed.

And the reward for those of us who give up on self, and give in to God, is Easter. And though this season of Lent may not *begin* with symbols of new life and birth, it certainly ends that way. And those who will find themselves being raised with Christ, will be those who have died to self, trusting solely in God's grace.

So, today is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Season of Lent, and do you know what? Old Lodge Skins was right: "This is a good day to die."

Amen.