

An Ash Wednesday and Good Friday Devotional  
*“To Dust We Shall Return”* and *“Were You There?”*

Two brief homilies for Ash Wednesday and Good Friday (for the price of one sermon).

**Ash Wednesday: “To Dust We Shall Return”** (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 19-20)

Every year, about this time, the Grammys are broadcast on TV. My wife and I always enjoy watching the Grammys and catching up on today’s popular music scene. Most years, the Grammy awards include at least one aging music star. For example, in recent years they have invited Neal Diamond, James Taylor, Glen Campbell, and The Rolling Stones to make an appearance. A few years ago they even brought back The Beach Boys to play some songs. And while I always enjoy seeing the older guests on the show, I find myself asking the question, “How did \_\_\_\_\_ get to be so old?” I remember when they were all young. But the real question is not, “How did that music star or rock band get so old?” The real question is, “How did I get to be so old?” For example, seeing the Beach Boys on the Grammys a few years ago looking like a geriatrics band from a local nursing home made me realize that my age is catching up to me—rapidly. I’m now in my late 50s. It seems like just a few weeks ago, I was in my middle 20s. Where did those years go to? Watching the old stars sing at the Grammy’s is always a vivid reminder to me that the clock is ticking, and ticking fast. The years are rapidly passing by.

And that’s certainly not all bad. What gives meaning to life is the ticking clock. Without the clock, life would be an endless drudgery. Life without an end point would be like a football game with no clock. Can you imagine watching a football game, or playing in a football game, that never ended? That just went on and on and on and on. Run the ball, throw the ball, smash your opponent—over and over again—without end. That would be misery. It’s the clock that makes the game interesting and vital. And it’s the same with life. If there were no death, life would be like a football game with no clock that went on and on and on forever. The fact that life has a clock, that life is limited, gives meaning to life. It was God’s wisdom, love and mercy that put a limit to human life. Without it, life would have no real meaning.

It’s important to at least occasionally remember that the clock is ticking, that we have a limited amount of time to live, and that life is speeding by rapidly. As we heard earlier, the book of Ecclesiastes says, “There is a time to live and a time to die.” A few verses later in that same chapter, Ecclesiastes adds, “All come from dust, and to dust all return.”

When we remember that life is short, it forces us to ask ourselves some very important questions. For example, “Are we right with God? Do we have faith in Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life, which gives us hope beyond this life?” In other words, are we spiritually ready to die? And, “Are we being faithful to God in the short amount of time we have?” Are we living out the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor? We also need to ask the question, “Are we right with the people in our lives, especially our family and friends? Do we love them like we should?” Other questions also come to mind like, “Are we using our limited time wisely? Are we serving others, or just ourselves?” When we take the time to hear the clock ticking, we tend to ask those kinds of ultimate questions.

The great gift of Ash Wednesday is that it vividly reminds us that life is short, that we are mortal, that time is limited, that the clock is ticking. Therefore, we better use the time we have well. As you come forward in just a moment, a member of our clergy will place ashes on your forehead and say to you, “From dust you come and to dust you shall return.” I can’t think of a more powerful reminder that you and I are mere creatures, with a limited life span, so we had better make good use of our limited time.

## Good Friday “Were You There?” (selected passages, see below)

Instead of a traditional homily for Good Friday, consider a combination scripture reading and solo (or congregational hymn) of “Were You There?” for this sacred worship service. Begin your homily with a few current examples of suffering, both local and beyond. You will have no problems finding examples from your own congregation and from the news: local, national, and international. For example, at this writing, I could tell about the death of a young man in my congregation, and about the horrible terrorist attack in Paris. There is never a shortage of examples of suffering. However, it will be far more impactful to give *current* examples during this Good Friday service.

After a few current examples of suffering, make the connection that the cross of Jesus tells us that God is a God of suffering, a crucified God. Then you can say, “Although God does not take away our suffering, God enters into our pain and shares it with us. The Bible tells us that Jesus is “a man of sorrows acquainted with grief.” The cross tells us that when we suffer, God suffers with us. So, on this Good Friday, let us remember that our God is a God of the cross.” (At this point you will begin the scripture readings below, interspersed with the solo or congregational singing of “Where You There?”)

### Scripture Readings/Solo

Read Mark 14:22-24, 26-27, 29-37, 41-43, 45-46, 50.

Soloist (or congregation) sings first stanza: “*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*”

Read Mark 14:53, 55, 60-65; 15:1, 12-20.

Soloist (or congregation) sings second stanza: “*Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?*”

Read Mark 15:25-32; Luke 23:34; Mark 15:33-34; Luke 23:46.

Soloist (or congregation) sings third stanza: “*Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?*”