

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

I am going to tell a parable that many of you know already. It is about three brothers. They were travelling along a lonely winding road, at twilight. They came upon a treacherous river, and found it impossible to cross. Luckily, they were magic, so they used their wands to build a bridge across the river, and began to cross it.

As they crossed the bridge, Death himself came up out of the water, furious with them, because usually travellers would die trying to cross the river, and he would have them. So Death thought to flatter the wizards and pretended to be deeply impressed by their magic, telling them that they each had earned a reward from him -- anything they wanted.

The first brother asked for a power that no one could overcome. So Death fashioned a wand out of the branch of an elder tree planted on the banks of the river, and gave it to the first brother. The second brother wanted to humiliate Death even more, and asked for the power to bring someone back from the dead, and Death gave him a stone from the riverbed, the resurrection stone. The third brother, however, was humble before Death, and asked for the ability to go about his life unseen by Death. Death gave him the cloak off his back, which when he put it on, made him invisible to Death.

The brothers crossed the river and went on their way. The first brother, being now both arrogant and powerful, went to a town where there was a man he had a feud with. He dueled with the man and easily defeated and killed him. He then bragged about his powerful wand which no one could overcome. As he slept that night, another man came and stole the wand from him, and slit his throat. Death took the first brother that very night.

The second brother went to his home, and turned the stone over in his hands three times. He was delighted when his betrothed, who had died an untimely death, appeared. But all was not well with her -- she grew distant and cold. She was not meant for the land of the living, and so, the second brother took his own life in order to join her. Death collected the second brother.

The third brother lived out his life, never boasting of his cloak, and though Death searched for him, he could never find him. When the third brother had aged and lived a full life, he gave the cloak to his son, and greeted Death as an old friend.

So, if you know this story, you know it is the tale of Three Brothers from Beedle the Bard, the mythical author of children's stories in the Harry Potter universe. I tell it to you today because it's a story for Lent: it shows us our own pitfalls, that by our power we think we can either control our own life, or fool death entirely. We do so many things to either deny our mortality or try to control it. We can't. We can only walk with the knowledge of our death, and in acceptance find freedom.

We can only live fully when we are free from death's claims on us, but we are fully aware of our mortality.

What do you need to confess today?

I have let trivial things get in the way of my full living of this precious life.

I have let distractions, pettiness, jealousy, clutter, desire for material things, lack of self-reflection, and selfishness get in the way of what is good and true. That is my confession, and I wonder what is in your life that you have chosen over fullness and reconciliation with God and with each other. I wonder if we can bring our full selves to the font, and let go of our sins.

And so, when we contemplate what a holy Lent looks like, we remember the traditions of the church: Lent is a time for preparation for baptism. This year especially we will hear stories of Jesus' encounter with people, drawing them into new life with him. And as we walk this path to the font and hear these stories, we keep in mind the idea of Saint Paul, which is that baptism is a death and a new birth.

It's not a coincidence that when we are marked with ashes, they are mixed with the oil that we use to seal the newly baptized. We are marked with the same sign of the cross that we receive in baptism.

We wear the sign of the cross on our foreheads every day of our lives, but it is this day that we make it visible, to remind ourselves who we are and whose we are. We are dust, and we are saved, we are dying and we are alive, we are broken and we are made whole.

What do you need to let die in order to live?

When Jesus says do not fast in the streets looking dismal, take him at his word. Let go of whatever you need to let go of not to make yourself miserable but to pursue a fuller life while you still have it. Let what is keeping you from authentic relationship and deep connection fall away, so that you can live. Because we know that the invisibility cloak that will keep death at bay is a myth, and we were promised in our baptism that we will die. We will also live.

Lent is not to make us miserable. Lent is to make us whole.

We have been made whole in baptism, and the promise is always there: you are beloved and you belong to God, you are dying and you are living. Keep a holy Lent.