

A few years ago, I lived in the Northeast in Philadelphia where, unlike my Southern California background where I spent most of my life, had very long winters, winters that extended far beyond my comfort level. All of the natural color was drained from the earth and sky. The chill in the air would get caught in my bones and stay there for months. And for the most part, people stayed inside. Most evenings during the week, I relied on shows and movies and looking at my phone to distract me from all the discomfort I was feeling ... the cold, feelings of homesickness, ruminating on stressors from work.

But in masking over my reality, I was letting winter deplete my spirit instead of being a time of nourishing and renewal. Isn't it fascinating that we spend so much of our lives distracting ourselves from our human and bodily experience? Why do we do this?

I think the Psalmist in today's reading helps us understand when they say, "God knows how we were made. God remembers that we are dust." And then the verses right after saying, "We are mortal, and our days are like grass. We flourish like flowers in a field, and then are blown away by a passing wind." In other words, we live in a state of impermanence.

The burial rite in the Book of Common Prayer says, "In the midst of life, we are in death." And this is such an uncomfortable reality that we are constantly trying to find ways to forget that we are dust, and to dust we will return. But what if we did the opposite? What if we remembered instead?

My last winter on the East Coast I decided to do things differently. I went down the street to my church, St. Peters, and received ashes on Ash Wednesday. As my priest drew the lines of the cross on my forehead, I heard the words, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return."

I let the dust of these ashes become one with the dust of my own skin, and I let these words settle into my own spirit as I entered into Lent. For the

next 40 days, instead of watching shows and movies or looking at my phone in the evening, I would turn off all my screens, light a candle and sit in silence. I prayed and journaled and meditated and let my body rest. And I often simply just watched the flicker of my candles burning. For 40 days, I sat in my discomfort. I felt my feelings. I thought my thoughts. And I practiced letting each of them go one by one into the loving embrace of God.

The same Psalmist who names the hard truth of our mortality and impermanence also says, "Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and do not forget all His benefits." The Psalmist goes on to name the benefits of forgiveness: healing, steadfast love, mercy, satisfaction and justice. There are so many gifts in our mortal existence, but we have to create space in our lives and in ourselves in order to receive them.

In a few moments, we will be receiving the imposition of ashes that will then lead into our 40 days of Lent. And you will be hearing the words, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return." Remember your impermanence. Remember that in the midst of life, you are also in death. And don't look away. Stay in your human experience. Feel your feelings and think your thoughts, and let God meet you in all of it with love and mercy, with healing and with deep satisfaction.

Over the next 40 days, may you remember and receive all of God's abundant gifts that are available to you in this season of Lent and every day of your human existence. Amen.