

Ash Wednesday
22 February 2012
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

Jill's parents owned a metal plating business, and people from all over Little Rock would bring their old brass, silver and nickel to be plated, buffed and repaired. The shop was a menagerie of the most interesting knick-knacks and sculptures, and as children Jill and her brother would play treasure hunter among the rows of intriguing things.

My father is an attorney, and when I was a kid I did something similar. I would visit his office and sit in his oversized chair, play with the Dictaphone (remember those?) and pretend to be a high-powered lawyer.

We've all done that, haven't we? As children, we all played at our parents' work, and with childlike eyes we imagined what might be down the road, where life might eventually take us. We enacted our future concretely, and for a few moments that made it real.

Well, that's all fine and good when your mom owns a shop or your dad works at a law firm. It becomes something altogether different when the family business is a funeral parlor.

My friend Ashley's family owns a string of funeral homes in the Arkansas River Valley, and as a child Ashley and her siblings did what we all did: they accompanied their parents to work. Except in this instance, hide and seek was played among tombstones and cremation urns, and when the day ran long and Ashley got tired, she would crawl into a comfortable, empty coffin to take her nap.

Can you imagine that? Have you ever lain in a coffin? Have you ever enacted *that* future concretely? Have you ever, for even a few moments, allowed it to be real?

Indeed you have, if you've ever kept vigil at the deathbed of one dear to you, if you've ever walked through the cemetery and paused at the crypt, if you've ever wandered into a church on Ash Wednesday and had your forehead smudged with ashes.

And yet, so often we feel on such occasions the flight response: To get away, to break the surface of that smothering water, to raise our downcast eyes to life and deny the reality of death. Poet David Whyte has something to say about this:

*Those who will not slip beneath
The still surface on the well of grief*

*Turning downward through its black water
To the place we cannot breathe,*

Will never know the source from which we drink,

*The secret water, cold and clear,
Nor find in the darkness glimmering
The small round coins
thrown by those who wished for something else.*

We can, Whyte says, flee from the reality of our mortality, from our grief at the loss of loved ones and the anticipation that our *own* lives will end, like those who hurry on after dropping a penny in the well and casting their futile wish.

Or, Whyte's poem reminds us, we can lie a while in the coffin, feeling the contour of its sides and the solidity of its frame. We can dive deep through the black water, to that place where we can scarcely breathe, where we recognize and even embrace the inevitability of death.

On the face of it, that acknowledgement is so frightening and so final. That's why the coffin strikes us as macabre, why we swim only in the shallows of our grief. But if we will dive *deep enough*, David Whyte knows, Holy Scripture knows, we will find not the abyss, but the source of us, the one who gives life and trumps death.

Catch that: the deepest layer of reality is not the abyss, and certainly not our own fragile being, but *God*.

When we dive that deep, we discover again that neither life nor death depends on us. We are but dust. This swirling creation and all that is in it depend only and ultimately upon that source from which we drink. All that we have and all that we are depend only on his grace and favor.

This day, indeed this season of Lent, presents to us the opportunity to dive deep into that water, to practice concretely the things that remind us of our contingency, our utter dependence on the Lord of heaven and earth.

Only after we have taken time to enact that future and swim in that reality, we can surface to find our fear and the urge for flight replaced by that distinctively Christian virtue: *hope*. We can recognize that when the source of us underlies all things, nothing is lost. We can affirm that the coffin is not forever, and that from the dust with which we are made God will restore us in due time to glory.

But we cannot get there quickly. There is no shortcut. First we must resist the urge to flee. First we must lie in the coffin. First we must dive deep.

Amen.