

March 2, 2022
Ash Wednesday
United, Oak Park

God Has a Place for These Things

"Mom, why do all those trees have white X's marked on them?"

I must have been about ten years old when I asked that question as my mother drove down a usually beautiful tree-lined street in my hometown of Independence, Iowa.

"They have Dutch Elm disease, Dennis. The trees are going to die. They'll have to be cut down."

Strange, I thought. How could something so tall and majestic have to die? But looking at the leaves told me that the trees weren't all that well. Later that summer the tree removal crews came; removing hundreds of elms in a town previously well-known for the graceful trees that lent their shade to the many avenues and Victorian porches along-side them.

All over town the white X's became the symbol for an eerie kind of death summons. "Not here too!" people would cry upon seeing the dreaded mark now on their block. Almost overnight it seemed that the town was being transformed to something more akin to the moon, the

arid and plant-less landscape that was being broadcast frequently on television thanks to the Apollo missions at the time.

In the past 50 years many trees have been planted in the places where century-old elms had stood. The town has started to seem green again. The new generation of trees should be more resilient to future threats, since there are many more varieties represented among them. But the newer trees will never fully replace the elegant charm of a broad canopy of leafy branches that once stood in their place. The memory of the white X's lingers on.

It was several years later and a different kind of an X—this time one in ashes and in the form of a cross—in which I realized that I too had also just painted a sign of impending death. A girl, not yet a year old, had been brought forward by her parents to receive the imposition of ashes along with the rest of the congregation at the beginning of Lent. But this was not right, I thought. Didn't I just baptize her only months before? Didn't I joyfully say "Kimberly Ann, child of God, you have been marked with the cross of Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit

forever" as my oiled thumb traced the sign of the cross on her still wet forehead?

Ashes or oil, it didn't matter. Kimberly had been marked for death from the day of her very birth into the world. Would it be that many years before she would discover that life often seems to be a series of missed opportunities and roads not taken? How long would it take for her to learn that each little put-down and each broken confidence in a friend or a family member would make it feel like a part of her had died? One day, eventually—maybe a century or more down the road—another pastor might cast dirt upon her coffin and again trace the sign of the cross over her body.

This day of Ash Wednesday is much like the first bitter chill of an early November day that warns us of the approach of winter. We won't live forever. Beautiful sunshiny days doesn't last. Parties come to an end. The Dow Jones Industrial Average can lose several points in a matter of minutes. These are the sobering truths that Ash Wednesday teaches us.

Yet bitter though these reminders are—in the ashen sign of that most terrifying of death instruments—we are still given the promise of salvation: "Behold, now is the acceptable time...Now is the day of salvation."

Why, Kimberly Ann, must your young skin be marked so? Why can't you live forever? This hurts me more than you can possibly know. But this cross—this symbol of death—is also your hope for eternal life and salvation. There is no victory without a cost. And Christ's victory over death came at a tremendous price.

Yet, Kimberly Ann, you may rejoice in all the losses of your life—even in your death!—because ultimately, God has things under control. Death will only be the start of a new life for you. So do not stay mournful, because God's promises will remain even when *all* the trees have died and there's not even a single leaf on the planet. God's promises will remain even if the sun should fail to rise and the winter never ends. Yes, Kimberly, you *are* dust, but God has a place even for this, and for that we can truly be thankful.