Sleepless Nights  
Ash Wednesday, March 5, 2014  
The Rev. Kara Wagner Sherer  
St. John’s Episcopal Church

This week I heard a story on *This American Life* that was aired just after 9/11. It was the story of the life of sailors on an aircraft carrier who spend days and months at sea, cooped up in small quarters, preparing for war. The storyteller and producer spent some time on the ship and one night were wakened by the loudest, most painful noise they had ever heard. They panicked and debated lying in bed to die, or going to some other part of the ship to meet the same fate. After 20 minutes of panic they heard an announcement that the drill was over. This was apparently regular life on an aircraft carrier, drills, practices, getting ready for an attack that may never come. It made me think about what we spend our lives practicing for. In particular, what we practice in church, especially on Ash Wednesday when we have ashes smeared on our foreheads with the words, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

What if the purpose of our daily life and practices is not so much about learning to live as it is about learning to die?

My good friend Heidi, who was a deacon here at St. John’s and is now the Vicar of St. Benedict’s in Bolingbrook, writes a blog, the Vicar of Bolingbrook. Last month she posted “Vigils, or Lying Awake in The Middle of The Night.” Vigils, is from the Latin word meaning “wakefulness”: a period of purposeful sleeplessness, an occasion for devotional watching, the monastic night office.

Heidi writes:

Part of adulthood, it seems

is waking up at 2 a.m. or 3 a.m.

and spending some time

in involuntary (often anxious)

contemplation.

Is this really the weakness

of an aging body and mind,

or in fact, a growing awareness

of the eternal?

At 2 a.m., our side of the earth

faces outward, away from the sun,

into the infinite darkness of the universe.

Eternity, I think, is what wakes us up,

asking us to look it in the face

with wonder and dread.

Asking us to listen to the silence,

but also, the heart beating,

children sleeping, and the night wind.

Or to hear the police and fire sirens,

ambulances screaming.

Asking us, I think, to pray

for those who work while others sleep.

For those who the night keeps hidden,

prostitutes, runaways, and drunks.

For the injured, the sick, the dying,

the alone.

Asking us to remember

that we’re not alone

when we’re awake

in the middle of the night.

Asking us to contemplate

a crack in the ceiling,

an infinite cosmos.

Asking us to ponder God’s glory

and our finitude.

This is the work of adults.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This is the work of Christians, especially on Ash Wednesday. We practice facing our own death, we remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. We face our finitude, the eternal. We practice death. We prepare ourselves to face the death of a close friend, the death of a family member, the news of a grave illness, a truth about ourselves that we cannot face. We practice dying.

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

What does it mean to live life, knowing that you will die?

1. copyright Heidi R. Haverkamp, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)