

Tom James  
February 6, 2008  
Ash Wednesday  
II Corinthians 5:21-6:10  
“The dash”

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When Michelle and I were first married, we used to watch a fair amount of science fiction. We could probably tell you a little about just about every *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode, and we are practically experts on the *X-Files*. Because of our interest in the *X-Files*, in fact, we also followed the careers of the actors. Gillian Anderson, who played Agent Dana Scully, hosted a show on one of the cable networks called “Future Fantastic.” Did anyone else ever watch that? It was a show about what life may be like later in the twenty-first century, when technology will likely have advanced to a nearly unimaginable degree.

One particular episode sticks out in my memory. It was an episode on mortality, and the interesting thing about it was that it treated mortality as a technological problem. That is, death is an encumbrance to our wishes and desires, but an encumbrance like any of the many, many others that we have overcome through good old human ingenuity. There was a kind of drama to the episode—it kept you at the edge of your seat. First it was suggested that we die because our organs wear out. But we can make new organs, either as well-run machines we implant or else as exact fleshly copies grown in a laboratory. Then it was pointed out that the problem would remain that our bodies appear programmed to shut down after a time. But we can tinker with the programming, perhaps even being able to select how long the program runs. Finally, one of the central ironies of life on earth was mentioned: the very element in the earth’s atmosphere that makes animal life possible, oxygen, happens also to be one of the most volatile, corrosive, destructive agents in the universe. It was pointed out that every time we breathe, the very source of energy that keeps our cells going is also scouring them, wreaking havoc with them. Toward the end of the show, it became increasingly apparent that the measures that would be needed to extend human life indefinitely would have to be more and more extreme, and the kind of life to be lived in that way would be less and less recognizably human.

Friends, the truth is that death is not a technological problem. Being mortal is not an accident. It isn’t a tragic mistake that we can somehow fix or make right. It’s the way we are made. It’s our destiny. Mortality is part of what makes us human.

I received an e-mail recently that had a link to a website with an illustrated poem called “The Dash.” The poem tells the story of a man who spoke at the funeral of a friend. He noted the birth and death dates on her monument, and then he remarked that what was really important was not the series of numbers but the dash between them. Here’s part of the poem: “For that dash represents all the time that she spent on earth, and only those who loved her know what that little line is worth.”

The little line represents the time we have. It is our “now.” It is our “acceptable time,” as Scripture puts it, the time we have been given to experience and to practice life. “Now” is an opportunity to be grasped. It is the unique and unrepeatable chance to accept our humanness and to employ our gifts for that sake of that which is lasting and worthwhile.

The season of Lent is book-ended by two funeral services that are actually our own. This is the first, when we acknowledge our mortality, and when we recognize that the time is too short to remain complacent with moral and spiritual failure and that we don’t have forever to live on earth and to get living right. But the second comes in about forty days. Easter. We don’t think of it that way, but that’s what it is! And I think the truth is that we couldn’t really bear this first funeral service without hope for the second. Easter puts Ash Wednesday in perspective. Because of Easter, death is swallowed in victory. Because of Easter, mortality is not a bare and barren dead-end, but an instrument of life. Easter faith teaches us to make good and faithful use of our dash, and assures us that our dash isn’t simply a little line, punched mindlessly from a keyboard between two

numbers on a funeral bulletin, but a fine brush stroke expertly placed on a canvas of grace and redemption that God is still painting.

Your dash is your part. It is your chance to shine, your chance to be beautiful in your own unique, unrepeatable way. What will your dash look like? It's your choice. Amen.