

“The Governor”

Psalm 51:1-19

<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm> (NRSV)

Julie Moss was naïve. As a restless Phys Ed major at college, she convinced her mother to pay her way to Hawaii so that she could run in the 4th annual Ironman competition in 1982. But Julie had never run a marathon before let alone a 2.4 mile swim and a 112 mile bike ride; yet she still was determined to take this grueling test of human will and strength. She thought it would be fun, and that it would be an easy way to get an “A” for one of her Phys. Ed. classes. Julie was naïve.

But despite the difficult conditions, Julie actually ran quite well in her first competition. Amazingly well. With little nourishment and less than adequate gear, she passed the leader and found herself in first place with 18 miles to go.

And then with a mere 400 meters to go, Julie’s body began to surrender to the fatigue and the sweltering temperatures. And Julie... fell; she got up again, and then pushed forward. She fell again; got up and then hobbled further, fighting through pain of cramping muscles in her legs. She collapsed again. And this time, she looke almost like she was dying.

It’s at this point in the race, that the second place challenger, whom she had passed at mile 8, catches up and

runs by the Julie lying on the ground. Julie is perhaps 10 feet from the finish line.

And today, Julie recalls that at that point, even though she knew she had lost the race, something inside of her said, “Get up.” Get up. Get up. And so, Julie Moss crawled to the finish line one inch at a time.

Today, when people ask Julie where that voice came from, she says that that voice came from her true self. According to Julie, the ego tells us to stop and surrender, but the real you - your very soul - wants you to keep going. She says that at our very core, we want to live forever and that our real self has no limits.

This is why we need Ash Wednesday.

I think Julie is right. Our primal self believes it is indestructible, invulnerable and impenetrable. We like to believe we are strong, fast, capable, healthy, beautiful and ageless.

But one honest look at our lives will show that we are not perfect. We have moles and freckles. We get coughs, colds and cancer. Our bones break, our muscles cramp. We get old. We die. And when we are confronted with this reality we are

humbled, shamed, sobered and...
sometimes...we sob.

In fact, I think the reason we all cry at funerals is because the core of our being doesn't know how to deal with something it doesn't want to do. We don't want things to end. We don't want to die. We want to keep on going we want to keep believing that there is nothing that can hurt us or destroy us. Nothing can end us.

And because the soul, our true self believes it can go on forever, it has a difficult time grappling with sin as well. We struggle to deal with the fact that we make mistakes, we fail, we are do wrong. And so we grit our teeth, we hold that guilt inside until it becomes shame. We lie to others and to ourselves and we avoid apologies.

But we do face an end. We do mess up. We do die. We do sin.

In Psalm 51, the passage that was read earlier, King David, has been confronted with his own frailty and sinfulness. He knows he has done wrong. He knows he has sinned. And so he lets it out in a vulnerable, difficult poem.

But David also knows deep down in his soul that there is hope. That God cleanses, God forgives, God honors those who are broken-hearted. God offers eternal life. David knows that

he is frail and sinful but he also knows that God forgives.

Today, you will be receiving a reminder on your forehead that may seem ugly and depressing. You will receive ashes on your forehead to remind you of your mortality – that you are destined to die. It is also a reminder of your sinfulness and your need for forgiveness. It is a reminder to your soul that your body will not go on forever. “Remember that dust you are and to dust you will return.”

But take note of its shape. It is in the shape of a cross. It is a reminder to your soul – an assurance that your sins are forgiven through the redemption made possible by Jesus' death on the cross. It is a reminder of the new life that Christ has given us; life that is full, life that is joyful, and life that will not be stopped by death.

This sign that you receive today is a sign of your limits, but don't be afraid it's also a reminder of the limits to the limits. This sign receive tells you to get low, but like Julie Moss recounted earlier, it also tells you to get up.