

Ash Wednesday

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

Those words about dust are used to remind us of our mortality. “Remember that you are dust...” Those are sobering words. They get in our face, literally, on this day when our liturgical prayer is very focused on our sinfulness and our need for forgiveness, for restoration. One commentator said, “Because this is the day of ashes, the beginning of Lent, the time to set one’s vision on the enormity of Jesus’ incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension, this is also a day to talk about death—what we are made of and what we will become. It is a day of utter honesty.”ⁱ

So often we think that “utter honesty” is about our sinfulness. And we certainly need to look at our sin – but perhaps not in the way we have done habitually. Sin is whatever separates us from God. When we pray the Litany of Penitence together, see how all the things we confess are really about how we separate ourselves from God and one another – and from our own true nature as Child of God. - Sin is whatever I let separate me from God – God present in my own center, God present in those around me, God present in creation, God present. And it is this sense of separation, the experience of brokenness that brings us time and time again to these ashes.

But these ashes are more than a sign of repentance or sorrow. Writing in *Christian Century*, Lutheran pastor Amy Zietlow says,

“The dust is not smeared in grief and despair, covering our faces in ash. It is carefully placed in the shape of our salvation. The dust cross on our foreheads hearkens back to the anointing of our baptisms, when a cross was drawn on our foreheads accompanied by the proclamation, “Child of God, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.” The promises of God stick to our dust and hold us in hope forever. That cross never leaves our lives; it is on our foreheads every moment of existence. The cross proclaims that every bit of our dust is claimed and loved by God.”ⁱⁱ

Every bit of our dust is claimed and loved by God. The commentator was right when she said this is a day to talk about what we are made of and what we will become. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” But hear the blessing Methodist minister and writer Jan Richardson finds in those words in her poem, “Blessing the Dust”:

BLESSING THE DUST

All those days
you felt like dust,
like dirt,
as if all you had to do
was turn your face
toward the wind
and be scattered
to the four corners
or swept away
by the smallest breath
as insubstantial—
did you not know
what the Holy One
can do with dust?

This is the day
we freely say
we are scorched.

This is the hour
we are marked
by what has made it
through the burning.

This is the moment
we ask for the blessing
that lives within
the ancient ashes,
that makes its home
inside the soil of
this sacred earth.

So let us be marked
not for sorrow.
And let us be marked
not for shame.
Let us be marked
not for false humility
or for thinking
we are less
than we are
but for claiming
what God can do
within the dust,
within the dirt,
within the stuff
of which the world
is made
and the stars that blaze
in our bones
and the galaxies that spiral
inside the smudge
we bear.ⁱⁱⁱ

I have often said that we are a people who believe in the Incarnation – that God has entered into creation, into the very matter that God created. So being made of dust, the same dust as the stars and the trees and all creatures great and small, and all our sisters and brothers, including our brother Jesus, is not a *bad* thing – but a reminder of the one God from whom all creation comes. The dust is a reminder of who we really are, from Whom we come and to Whom we return.

Yes, let us be aware of the sin in our lives – those things we let separate us from awareness of God’s presence. Those are things we could try to let go of this Lent – Chocolate need not be on the list probably. But let us be more aware of the *presence* of God’s presence – in the very dust that we find scattered in our own lives and the lives of those around us. Let us see in the dustiness of people we don’t really like, or the dust of prejudices we’ve held onto for most of our lives, or the ashes of broken relationships, the opportunity for God’s creative love to bring new life.

Let us remember that we are dust... messy dust, but God dust. Let us entrust ourselves, dust and all, into the hands of God – to be made into whatever will serve the needs of our neighbors, and whatever will restore all things in Christ.

May it be so.

Amen.

- [Isaiah 58:1-12](#)
- [2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](#)
- [Matthew 6:1-6,16-21](#)
- [Psalm 103 or 103:8-14](#)

ⁱ Quivik, Melinda. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4397

ⁱⁱ Zeittlow, Amy. "Living the Word: Reflections on the Lectionary" *Christian Century*, February 26, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richardson, Jan. "Blessing the Dust" in *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*.

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