

Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 by Patty Friesen Ash Sunday, Feb. 19/23

slide 1 - cross in ashes - Today we are marking Ash Sunday. The beginning of Lent is officially this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday but since most of us can't make it in for a service and since we're low church, we can do whatever we want.

In the Middle Ages, the church decided to have 40 days of fasting and praying before Good Friday in order to imitate the 40 days of Jesus fasting and praying in the wilderness. They called these 40 days Lent which in Latin means to "lengthen" because this season comes in spring as the days in the northern hemisphere begin to lengthen. The Wednesday beginning the 40 days became Ash Wednesday, when special church services focused on spiritual renewal and in remembering Jesus' death on the cross, remembering our own mortality - that from ashes we came and to ashes we will return. The ashes came from burning the palm branches from the previous year's Palm Sunday.

While early Anabaptists may have parted with these Catholic practices, in our old blue 1930 hymnal, there are hymns for Lent and Ash Wednesday so some communities must have kept these practices. Certainly, in many of our churches, whatever our denomination of origin, there were springtime revival meetings to help renew our focus on Christ.

Lent is our annual rehearsal of the cosmic moment when Jesus' suffering and death and resurrection will change how we experience death. Death will not be the defining truth about us. Someday we will be freed from the gorgeous and horrible limitations of our human lives, and we will live forever with God. But first Jesus suffers

and dies. We walk with him. And he walks with us. Jesus will walk with us through whatever kind of Lent we are having.

During Lent, we ask God to show us the world as it is. We begin with the reality of our finitude rubbed on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday— from dust we were made, to dust we shall return. Then, we walk through that reality in a kind of dress rehearsal. It's the downward slope of God—the Great Descent, where the whole Church walks toward the cross.

In the words of Kate Bowler, whose Lenten devotions we can use on-line, link in bulletin or printed on lobby table. Frankly, Lent is my favorite part of the church calendar because it is a time when the whole church is on the losing team. A time when we all get a minute to tell the truth: Life is so beautiful and life is so hard. For everyone. Of course, the cross isn't the end of the story, but this season of grief is carved out to acknowledge the reality of Christ's sacrifice. And the reality of suffering that so many of our circumstances reflect too—our own pain and grief and despair. Easter is coming, yes. But for now, we sit in the ashes of our broken dreams and broken hearts, knowing that God sits here with us.

Many people practice Lent by giving something up—alcohol, meat, chocolate, social media. Some take up something new—a new prayer practice. Lent is an incredible moment for spiritual honesty - a spiritual housecleaning as such.

Slide 2 - dust pile - Spring is a time for spiritual and physical housecleaning. Patrick and I are usually inspired on some Thursday off to tackle spring housecleaning. Clean house is a humbling task. Like a spiritual inventory, you really get to see up close what your life is made of. The worse room in our house, is the TV room and this is what

we found under the love-seat recliner this year - one big dust bunny to the right there, one chip, one pretzel, one pistachio shell, popcorn popped, popcorn kernel, one peanut, one pumpkin seed, one vitamin, one Advil, one thing that keeps pills fresh, 2 black beans, and one rib-bone. Fascinating. We must eat like Cookie Monster from Sesame Street with food flying everywhere.

Mennonite pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler cleans the rented church space for Raleigh Mennonite Fellowship in Raleigh, North Carolina. It's part of their rental agreement to clean up after themselves. Pastor Melissa says, "in truth, I find nothing especially spiritual about cleaning. Instead checking bathrooms for paper towels is humbling. Whatever hearty proclamation I make from the pulpit, however our hearts are rent by soaring hymns, our skin turns to dust that accumulates in cracks and corners. We create waste. Someone must clean it up.

"What is this place, where we are meeting? Huub Oosterhuis wonders in his hymn. "Only a house, the earth its floor." Each time I sing this song, I wish there was a verse for the corners where the dust and bits of paper accumulate. Cleaning the corners for worship robs me of any illusion to transcendence I've invested in church life. We are earth people, dust-making creatures and to dust we shall return...After the beauty and the grace of gathered bodies in worship, the pastor is the one who bears witness to what is left behind, in trash cans and under chairs.

In Genesis we learn that we are made from dust. God creates people from a mixture of dust from earth and wind. Ever since then God has had to sweep up after us. Dusty creatures that we are we disappoint God and each other...I clean up the church week after week and I've come to accept that we can't get away from making a mess -

physically and spiritually. What is this place where we are meeting? It's the place where we learn to love the dust." (Christian Century, Sept. 2022)

Slide 3 - ash signing - Today, we will hear these words, "Remember you are human, from dust you came, to dust you will return," that traditionally accompany the signing of the cross in ash on foreheads and hands throughout Christian churches worldwide. The ritual is strikingly simple and ruthlessly communal and egalitarian. We do not do it alone; children and adults, young and old, male and female, we are all labelled as mortal. Knowledge of this radical sharing of our destiny draws us together at the onset of the season of Lent.

We are invited to mark our intention for this time of recognition, of desire, or hope by coming forward and receiving an imposition of ashes on the back of our hand or forehead - just point to the back of your hand or forehead for where you want to carry your ashes this morning. This ritual is called an imposition of ashes because it is a putting upon of ashes but it is also an imposition in the other sense as our physical death or mortality itself is an imposition on life and our mistakes and sin are an imposition on our spiritual lives and relationships. In our humility, may God impose grace and forgiveness upon us. I'll close with Blessing the Dust by Jan Richardson

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.

—Jan Richardson