

# Ash Wednesday

All Years

- [Joel 2:1-2,12-17](#)
- [2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](#)
- [Matthew 6:1-6,16-21](#)
- [Psalm 103](#)

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. When I hear this saying, I'm transported to a number of places. To each and every Ash Wednesday that I've spent in the church since birth. To the different seasons of my life I've been in, thinking about family and friends I've lost in the past year. And to the many places in scripture that mention dust and dirt. One of my favorites is this story: Jesus went to the temple, sat down, and started to teach. The Scribes and Pharisees brought to him a woman who was caught in adultery. Her punishment was clear in the eyes of the law- she should be stoned for her sins. While they continue trying to trap Jesus about the consequences of her actions, Jesus bent down, and wrote something in the dust of the ground. When he finally arises and responds, he says, "Let anyone among you who is without sin cast the first stone." And then he returned to writing in the dust. What did Jesus bend down to write? Tradition has it that he wrote the sins of each of the accusers on the ground. And when they saw their own sins written before them, they dropped their stones, and walked away. Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. What do you hear?

Ash Wednesday invites us to an occasion of honesty- a time and a place to make a realistic assessment of the heart, soul, and mind. Which actions have we done as self-sacrificing and giving to others? Which actions, to put it mildly, we haven't? When we find ourselves not only hearing but responding to the words of the Litany of Penitence in our service, how will our hearts be moved? Not loving God with our whole heart and not loving our neighbors as ourselves. Not forgiving. Not serving. Recalling past unfaithfulness. Anger. Waste and pollution of creation. Negligence. Our self-indulgent ways. Many of us aren't fond of having our mistakes and faults highlighted. Sins which sum up the ways we act, in which we damage ourselves, our world, and our relationship with God. This is an occasion of honesty to take stock and lament our sins. When we create the sacred space for this exploration, we are reminded how much it is a part of all our lives. By beginning a Holy Lent with self-examination and contrition, it gives us a chance to look at all the parts of our lives, even those we might want to hide.

We don't take on this important endeavor for the purpose of bringing shame to ourselves or others, but rather to find the places we need God to breathe life into. When those ashes are placed on our heads, they remind us that it was from this very dust that God created humankind and that God is constantly working in us to make us new and whole. Lent is a season to practice new disciplines, practice, not per-fect. A season to accept

responsibility for how we participate in a world that devalues life by claiming that some are in and some are out, that some are born with something that makes them 'the other'. The sin that all are not made in the image and likeness of God- that all life is not built from the same ashes that we are. Whether consciously or unconsciously we take part in the world which lifts up otherness- the sin that all are not beloved of God.

Ancient Christian Monk Evagrius says sin is forgetfulness of God's Goodness- forgetfulness in God's purpose of creating us- that causes us time and time again to betray ourselves and each other.<sup>1</sup> We have no right to call anyone 'ordinary', for each one of us is extraordinary, an ensouled body made in the divine likeness; and the real culpable blindness of the spirit that can be compared to living in the dark, is the failure to see the true value, the wonder and the mystery of every person you meet. When we return to the earthy goodness that we made of, we find healing just as Jesus used dirt and mud to heal. Restoration to wholeness of life for our ourselves and the world. We return to balance and a peaceful rhythm. Instead of gathering dust on the material things of earth, storing up too much here, God desires for us to store up different treasures. In reflecting on all the treasures we have, especially those spiritual ones that connect us to God, it leads them to burst forth from our lives, just as Jesus did from the tomb, combating sin and brokenness.

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<sup>1</sup> Mayne, Michael. "Pray, Love, Remember."

Sin is chaotic and messy, much like ashes. It can blow where the wind chooses, but God redeems the chaos and the mess by breathing life into it. We can try, but we cannot free ourselves alone. We need help- the help and guidance that Jesus brings to us in his own journey through the wilderness, to Jerusalem, the cross and grave. We need the help of a loving community around us. We need help to feel love instead of shame. Because even if we feel so far away from God, wondering whether God is really "out there" or even listening to our cries or laments, God never separates from us. It may feel like it on our end- when we sometimes can't find that connection. But God remains faithful and by our sides.

By Jesus writing in the dust, he was helping those nearby become a new creation: a creation not bound by the Law of Moses, but by the love of God. Just as God formed humans from the dust of the earth, so Jesus helped re-form all who seek him. As you move through this Season of Lent, remember these words from Poet Jan Richardson: Within these Ancient Ashes, Be marked not for sorrow. Be marked not for shame. Be marked not for false humility or for thinking we are less than we are. But be marked 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.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jan Richardson. *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*. "Blessing the Dust."