

Ash Wednesday 2021

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalm 103:8-14

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Do we need a reminder, this year,
That we are dust,
And to dust we shall return?

It hardly seems so.
And yet,
Even if we don't need a reminder,
We are called, today,
To remember, reflect,
Repent, reconcile.

To speak the ultimate truth about ourselves,
A truth we can hardly bear.
We are dust,
And to dust we shall return.

This past year has dismantled
So much of the structure
Of our carefully ordered lives.
Pleasures, conveniences, expectations, yes.
A lot of simple things,
And we can tell ourselves
They are relatively unimportant.
But it sets us on edge to lose the ordinary rhythms of our lives.

The deep foundations of our lives
Are shaken as well.
The foundations of our common life:
Trust that the good earth will shelter us,
And nurture us.
Trust that our civic institutions have some integrity.
Trust that the arc of history bends towards justice.

And the foundations of our close communities are shaken –
Our families, friends, homes.
Simple gatherings filled with talk and laughter,
Tears and burdens shared,
Food served at a gracious table.
The warm embrace of a loved one.

The hand held in sickness,
The eyes closed at death.
The gathering at the graveside,
The wedding bouquet tossed into the laughing crowd,
The fragile holding of a newborn.
And, for those of us in the Christian household,
The nurture of holy communion
In the midst of the gathered people.
Voices joined in song.

We have come unmoored
From all these signs of life,
And all these markers of a good death.
We don't need to be reminded
That we are dust.

And yet here we are, remembering,
Even though we need no reminder.

Here we are,
Today, this evening,
And in the forty days and forty nights to come,
Focusing on the thing
that's been right before our eyes
for a year now.

We can't avoid it;
It's more present than ever.

Perhaps, at some point this year,
You have been lonely, bored,
Frustrated, or grieving.
Resentful. Afraid.
Maybe all at once.

So you don't need to be reminded
That you are dust.
And probably, painfully,
You have been reminded
that those around you are dust.

But reminding
Is not the same as remembering.
Reminding is annoying.
It leaves us stuck in old patterns,
And tired reactions.

You can hide from a reminder,
Or at least wear yourself out trying.

But today we remember.
Remembering
Is one of the works of the people of God.
Remembering is the beginning of the long journey
Through repentance,
To reconciliation.
To renewal.

Nobody needs a reminder right now.
The good news is this:
We are called to be a people who remember –
A people who show
That the way of truth,
Facing the truth, telling the truth,
And turning around to follow the truth
Is the way of hope.

Our humanness, our finitude,
Our frailties,
Our mortal existence
In a world that will someday come to an end,
This utter finitude
In a world of dust is real.
Hiding from it, covering it up,
Brings anxiety and anger, fear.
Remembering it,
Embracing it even,
Brings hope.

Will you choose the way of hope today?
Will you choose to go beyond the reminders
Of the dustiness of everything
And remember that you are dust?
Will you turn, again,
To the one who breathes life into the dust,
Our dust,
And sets us free to love?
Dust is the building block of our humanness.
Dust, and divine breath,
Give us life.

If we embrace the act of remembering,
Embrace the essence of how we are made,

And how we come alive,
We can return, and reconcile.
Over and over again.

Be reconciled to God.
Now is the acceptable time.

Reconciliation begins with truth.
Speaking truth,
Listening to truth,
Affirming truth.
Today, this truth:
We are dust, and to dust we shall return.

Reconciliation continues
With an acknowledgement of brokenness,
Of harm done willingly or unwillingly,
Things done and left undone.

Then we make amends.
When and if it is possible,
We repair, restore,
Replace what has been broken,
Offer, accept what is new.

Then we establish new patterns,
ways of speaking and acting and listening,
of refraining and engaging,
that will bring life.

And somewhere along the way,
We ask and offer forgiveness.

We do this with each other,
When we have enough will and courage and love
To do the hard work.

We can do this with God, too,
With the one who is always longing for relationship
With each of us,
And with all of us in community.

Now is the acceptable time.

Now, more than ever,
We are called to be a people of reconciliation.

We are called, daunting as it may seem
To a people made of dust,
To become the righteousness of God,
Actors in the drama of salvation.

People who understand and accept
What the world is like.
Who acknowledge both the beauty
And the frailty of this island home.
A people who say,
The universe is flying apart and will come to an end.
The planet is melting and catching fire
And freezing all at once.
Disease stalks among us,
Our common life is in tatters,
We are weary to our bones,
And yet there still lives,
In the poet's words,
"the dearest freshness deep down things." *

That freshness springs from the dust.
When we speak this truth about the world,
We become partners with God.

We are called, daunting as it may seem
To a people made of dust,
To shine a light on the world's brokenness
And our brokenness within it,
To be loving in the midst of fear,
To create community in a time of distance,
To speak against injustice,
To combat cruelty,
To name oppression and want and need.

We are called,
Even as we remember that we are dust,
To embrace hope,
To trust in what is beyond what we can know or see.

We are called
To remember and make a choice:
Will we act as though there is no meaning,
As though there is no future,
As though nothing matters
Because it is all dust?

Or will we say,
We are dust,
But we are dust made alive
By the breath of life itself,
Made lovely by love itself,
Made whole and healed
By the one who makes all things new.

We are dust,
And we matter.
We have a future and a hope.
Our lives and our choices have meaning.
We are reconcilers,
Partners with God
In the awesome work
Of breathing dust into life.

*Hopkins, "God's Grandeur"