

Ash Wednesday

Stardust

One day, a girl came to church, accompanied by her foster parents. It was Ash Wednesday. When it came time for her to have the ashes imposed on her forehead in the sign of the cross, the priest said to her, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

She went back to her seat, crying. Later, her foster mother, who loved her very much, asked her why she was crying. She answered, “All my life, people have told me that I am dirt. I never expected the church to tell me that too!”

During the Ash Wednesday service, we lament our sins and acknowledge our wretchedness before God. We kneel before God as sinners, unable to commend the life of prayer, peace, and love that God calls us to live. And we are reminded by the ashes where we come from. But is it dirt? Are we dirt?

It is tempting to soften or even ignore the more difficult parts of Ash Wednesday in order to make our Lenten journey more palatable to us. After all, we are more accustomed to words of comfort and reassurance in church. But when we do this—when we close our ears to the harshness of the language, deny that it applies to us, inwardly tone down the message that calls for us to lament our sins and acknowledge our wretchedness—we lose the heart of Ash Wednesday and so move into Lent with a watered-down map of our journey with Christ.

The heart of this holy day is not how loudly we lament our sins and acknowledge our wretchedness, as important as that

might be for our own truth-facing. The heart is not even the smudge on our foreheads or the dust from which we came and to which we shall return. The heart of Ash Wednesday is not Ash Wednesday. This day is not the end but the beginning.

The heart of Ash Wednesday is an invitation to go deeper into the heart of God. The whole point is not that we are dust but that we are precious, beloved children of God. The whole point is that we are precious enough to God that God would send God's only Son to redeem us and to reconcile us to God. The point is not that God wants us to be buried in ashes but that God wants us to be buried with Christ—and then risen with him. God desires not separation but relationship with us, not the death of sinners but life for us sinners.

It may help to know where the dust comes from, whereof we come and to which we shall return. Here's where:

In the far reaches of the universe a very long time ago, an old star dies, in an explosion that sends its atoms across millions or even billions of light years. Eventually the dust created by this exploded star ends up in our little corner of the universe. That dust becomes the building blocks for this world, our fragile earth, and for life, including us.

That we are made up of the remnants of dying stars should bring us to our knees in gratitude for the miracle of our creation by our Maker, who is so infinitely creative to have us born out of mighty stars. That we are then loved so much that God gave his only Son to walk with us on this earth and give himself for us is a gift beyond compare. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." We are made from dust. But we are not dirt. We are dust, and not just any dust. We are stardust.

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

Deeper than Dust

One summer, as the result of a wrong turn on the way from San Francisco to New York, we found ourselves crossing through the southern Nevada and Utah desert rather than tooling along on the comfortable highway that everybody else takes to cross this part of the country.

After we filled up on gas at the edge of the desert, there was a bumpy two-lane highway. The first sign we saw said, “**Next Gas Station In 103 Miles.**” It was two hours before we passed a car going the other way.

When evening came, we stopped somewhere and camped for the night. The Nevada desert is much like how I would envision the wilderness where Jesus went after he was baptized, led by the Spirit. Perhaps it is also like the wilderness the Israelites wandered through between the Red Sea and the Promised Land. The Nevada desert was not sandy but rocky. There were no trees, only a bunch of shrubby little bushes dotting what in a better mood one might call “the landscape.” Here and there, I came upon some bones of a large animal that either died of thirst or was killed by an even larger animal. It didn’t take long in this kind of place to start thinking about what you need to survive—and what you don’t need. This is not a place for spending four days, let alone forty days or forty years. When you are in the wilderness, stripped of the usual physical, emotional, social, and cultural comforts, and when you are vulnerable and exposed, what is left of you?

How would you answer the questions: Who am I? What makes me live?

When the Israelites emerge from the wilderness after forty years, they finally know who they are, where they have come from, how they got there, and who brought them there. They know that they are God's beloved people, and that it is by God's grace that they have arrived. When Jesus emerges from the wilderness after forty days, he too comes out knowing who he is, where he comes from, and what he has been sent to do.

Sometimes life gives us wildernesses like this—places in our lives where we doubt ourselves, face an uncertain future, test ourselves, and then find out who we are. But the church also gives us a kind of institutional wilderness, which we call “Lent.” On Ash Wednesday, we are encouraged to remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. In the following weeks, we are invited to go deeper—deeper than dust—to the One who made us from dust. For forty days, we can wipe away the excesses of our daily life and find out what's left of us: who we are, where we come from, and who brings us here.

Are we wandering nomads—or the Bride of Christ? Are we orphans and slaves in Egypt—or sons and daughters of God? In the wilderness, we will find out. As we seek our answers, may we always remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. We are also God's beloved ones, and to God we shall return.