

Ash Wednesday A
February 26, 2020

ASHES

13.8 billion years ago, cosmologists say, all of the matter in the Universe—compacted into a ball of infinite density, gravity, and heat—suddenly burst its bonds, and within a trillionth of a trillionth of a second, the universe exploded into being.

We call it the BIG BANG—God splitting the seams and flinging energy and matter out on a seemingly unending circuit through the heavens. Everything that exists traces its origins back to that singular moment.

The gases that, under the force of gravity, coalesced into stars and galaxies; the matter that, upon the death of those stars billions of years later, was hurled back into space, seeding the formation of solar systems like our own—it was all there.

My dust was there, as was yours, and it's all returning to dust. Nature's recycling plan on the grandest scale imaginable.

REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE DUST AND TO DUST YOU SHALL RETURN.

These words have always struck me as profound, for they make me inescapably aware of my individual mortality while at the same time they link me to the macrocosmic cycle of transformation, of turning and returning, of going out and coming back, of death and rebirth.

Our lives, these words remind us—the very cells of which our bodies are composed—are not our own. We did not will ourselves into existence, neither will we chose when or how our lives on this Earth will end.

All that might be said is, we return to the hand that flung us out, we return to the one whose imagination, whose largess, whose grace, continue to intrigue and confound, surprise and dumbfound us.

Tonight we specks of dust with unbounded egos plod on to the font of ashes. And clinging to an invitation mouthed by God through Jesus, we dare to hope our DUST, our MATTER, MATTERS.

REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE DUST AND TO DUST YOU SHALL RETURN.

The season of Lent is a paradox, for in this season we purposely and intentionally examine on the one hand the limits of our abilities to do what God asks us to do—to love our neighbor and care for creation; and on the other hand, the depth of the claim Christ makes on us in baptism, and the boundless power of the Holy Spirit to amend and transform our lives.

The Lenten discipline of letting go—of a habit, a vice, a craving, or some other element we would be better off without—coupled with the discipline of embracing a new habit or practice that will deepen our commitment for wholeness—these are outward expressions of the Lenten paradox.

Letting go—embracing. Turning from—turning toward. Holding close—flinging outward.

Every step, every movement, is needed for the dance. Jesus taught us how, if we can only remember it, and God uses both to guide us on the journey and deepen our trust in him.

It was nearly a year ago that I traveled to Minnesota to be with my mother during what became the final week of her life. The day after she died, I remember vividly sitting in the mortuary office with my sister Randi. looking at urns on the wall and choosing which urn would be most suitable for mom's ashes, which urn would serve as a proper container to hold them as we commended her into God's everlasting care and placed them in the ground.

Many of you know what that process is like. EARTH TO EARTH, ASHES TO ASHES, DUST TO DUST.

Once you'd held the ashes of a loved one in your hands, you never forget.

It won't be long before the ashes we receive tonight are brushed aside, before our foreheads are washed clean.

Old habits, being what they are, will lull us into the sleep that dreams of ourselves at the center of our universe. But the cross, Christ's claim on us, will remain, marking us invisibly and indelibly.

REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE DUST AND TO DUST YOU SHALL RETURN.

Amen.