

**“Dust”**

**Genesis 2:4b-7**

**Ash Wednesday**

**March 2, 2022**

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***“Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground...”***

**Genesis 2:7a**

### **Prayer of Preparation**

O Lord, open our hearts and our minds that may receive your word in Christ. Amen.

### **Message**

Over the years, I have conducted hundreds of funerals. I don't know how many exactly, but I am sure the number is over three hundred.

Indeed, I don't know how many times I have said the words, “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, blessed are the dead who die in the Lord; yes, says the Spirit, they will rest from their labors, for their deeds will follow them.”

They are words that remind us, in the face of our mortality, that we always have a way of returning to the basics: we are as Genesis says created out of the dust of the ground. We begin with God breathing life into us, and we end with God receiving us back, as we give thanks to God for what God created in the first place.

I think the same holds true of Ash Wednesday. Here, I can say with a little more precision that I have shared in thirty-four Ash Wednesday services. I don't know how many foreheads I have smudged with ashes, but I do know that I have shared similar words when I say, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return; repent and believe in the gospel.” Remember who you are and turn to God.

### **Season of Lent**

The season of Lent is a season that begins with this basic confession: I am dust, and not God. I am human, all too human. I am a creature, not the Creator. All

the chemicals, all the particles in my body, come from what the Lord has made. I did not make myself.

The apostle Paul also alludes to this insight when he tells the Corinthians that they are “earthen vessels” (2 Cor 4:7). They are, he says, like clay pots, cracked and fragile, which nevertheless hold the very treasures of God’s grace, realizing how even in weakness, God’s grace is manifest (2 Cor 12:9). A remarkable insight.

Indeed, as we read the scriptures, we realize how God gives us this life from beginning to end, and we see how, throughout, God is always drawing near, seeking to breathe new life in us. And it is in that drawing near when we realize how all too often, we miss the mark, or like the apostle Paul, we do what we don’t want to do, and we don’t do what we need to do (Rom 7:15). Our motives seemed to be tainted, mixed, even confused. And yet, in drawing near to us, we see how God’ grace is sufficient and how God’s forgiveness present (2 Cor 12:9).

Such is our journey as Christians. In fact, if we are honest, we will notice how “ordinary” this journey is. God’s ways of reaching us, or coming to us, are in plain sight. We don’t need to look far.

Dust – to remind us of our mortality.

Ashes – to communicate penitence.

Bread – to offer nourishment.

Notice how God uses the ordinary to lead us into a deeper communion with Christ and with one another.

During this special time of the year, we learn again what the Lord is wanting to teach us, as those created out of the ground of the earth (Gen 1:27); or as those who, like Job, sit on the ash heap to contemplate our suffering and pain (Job 2:8), wondering where God is. During Lent, we open ourselves up to the reality of God’s instruction, and to the ways God wants to relate to us: comforting us, yes, but also challenging us, provided we stay awake to what is *in plain sight*.

**Ash Wednesday**

Tonight, what is in plain sight is dust. Dust, those particles we try to wash away in our homes; that make our eyes water or our noses to sneeze. That stuff that can choke our wind passages.

Indeed, I will always remember the dust I inhaled, working in a grain elevator along the Ohio River. It was also attached to a flour mill. The dust was constant. The smell horrible. The air thick and dirty. It all like smoke clinging to the skin.

We often speak of dust bowls and dust storms, of course. Reminders that the dust can come and go. We find dust just about everywhere.

In the book entitled *Lent in Plain Sight*, which we encourage you to read, the author points out this fact: that every Ash Wednesday we come to grips with dust; and we note how the dust can cling to us, even how it can choke us if we allow it.<sup>1</sup>

In similar fashion, the author mentions how our memories can also cling to us, the memories of those who have gone before us. There are connections that can surface, which can be difficult to claim given our brokenness, our sinfulness.<sup>2</sup> In fact, I would venture to say that we all experience such brokenness at some point in our lives, those up and down experiences – the celebrations, the transitions, even the dark and lonely moments.

Lent is a time when we remember the cost of taking this journey and remembering those moments, but also the redemption that comes in them.<sup>3</sup>

### **Shake the Dust**

Maybe this is one of the reasons why Jesus says what he says to his disciples when they begin their journey. He knows what it is going to entail. He tells them as much in Luke's Gospel when he says that when they encounter folks who won't receive them and welcome them; he tells them to shake the dust off their feet and keep on moving (9:1-6).

It is a reminder our relationship with Christ will involve times when we try to make sense of life, when there will be challenges along the way. But it is also a

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Duffield, *Lent in Plain Sight* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2020), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 9.

reminder that, with God's grace, there is redemption. We can prevail, depending solely on God.

It is a good image to keep in mind in terms of this season of Lent, to remember that image of "shaking the dust off our feet." It is an image that can help us navigate our own relationships with God and others, for when Jesus speaks these words to his disciples, he knows that even with all their best efforts and good intentions, they will be met with indifference, even hostility, just as he was (Luke 9:5). Not everyone will follow.

Hence, the wisdom: there will come times when they (and we) will need to "shake the dust off our feet," if not our souls, if we want God's goodness to come through, if we want Christ to live in us.<sup>4</sup>

For example, is there dust embittering a relationship for you or hurting a friendship, or sapping your energy. If so, shake it off.

Or is there anger or envy that you need to get rid of, hurt, frustration? If so, shake the dust off. Shake it off! Is there a judgmental spirit or a bias you need to face? If so, shake the dust off!<sup>5</sup>

As followers of Christ, our job is not to judge other people; that's God job. Our job is to point the way and let God do the rest, in us and in others. Indeed, if anything, we don't need to go on a self-righteous kick that assumes we are the perfect embodiment of the kingdom, or that anyone who does not relate to God the way we do is beyond hope.<sup>6</sup>

Instead, we need to shake the dust off *our feet* and realize how we are limited too, and how we see through a glass darkly too (1 Cor 13:10). It is a call to humility, but it is also a prayer of confession that says, "I am all too human as well and I need God and God's forgiveness too."

In other words, by shaking the dust off, we are letting God do what only God can do. We are realizing that we can't carry all this dust alone. There are things only Christ can carry, and we need to let Christ to handle.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Wells, "Shaking the Dust," in *Faith & Leadership* (July 29, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Put differently again: we need leave the dry earth, the dust, to God, and know that God can take that dust and make something beautiful out of it, out of our dust and ashes. That is what this journey is about.<sup>8</sup>

When we shake the dust off our feet, when receive the ashes, we are saying, “Thank you, Lord, thank you for the privilege of being part of the way you are redeeming the world, that even with my limitations and my weaknesses, in my sinfulness, I am part of your saving work. Not easy work, but saving and glorious work. Thank you.”<sup>9</sup>

By shaking the dust, by receiving the ashes, we are letting God do what only God can do: to create in us a clean heart and right spirit (Ps 51:11).

### **Invitation**

Hence, our questions tonight:

What dust is clinging to you?

What dust do you need to let go of?

What do you need to shake off?

For what we want to share tonight are indeed words of hope, words of redemption, words that remind us of who we are and whose we are – that we belong to the earth and to the earth we shall return (Ecc 3:20).

Great indeed is the mystery of the gospel!

Let us turn to God and celebrate this holy time. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.