



## What God Can Do With Dust

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field*

*Ash Wednesday ~ March 6, 2019*

### **Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come. Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord, your God? Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep. Let them say, “Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

### **Psalm 103:8-14**

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| 8 You are full of compassion and mercy, *<br>slow to anger and of great kindness.                      | 12 As far as the east is from the west, *<br>so far have you removed our sins from us.            |
| 9 You will not always accuse us, *<br>nor will you keep your anger for ever.                           | 13 As a parent has compassion for a child, *<br>so do you have compassion for those who fear you. |
| 10 You have not dealt with us according to our sins, *<br>nor rewarded us according to our wickedness. | 14 For you yourself know whereof we are made; *<br>you remember that we are but dust.             |
| 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, *<br>so is your mercy great upon those who fear you.   |   |

### **2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10**

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

### **Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

Jesus said, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the

door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Today we begin, yet again, the season of Lent. 40 days of walking the final weeks, days, and hours of Jesus life with him before we arrive in Jerusalem and wait with him while he dies. We do all of that knowing, of course, that the joy and glory of Easter is just beyond the darkness of the grave. Knowing that in Easter we lift our eyes up and look to the skies—as the great Wesley hymn goes, “Soar we now where Christ has led, following our exalted Head; made like him, like him we rise, ours the cross, the grave, the skies.” And all of that soaring stuff is good, really good, but much of the time I am more interested in my next meal than I am with soaring into heaven. I have always been a bit more interested in the earth than the skies. More at home with flesh and its wonderful strangeness than with grand dreams of eternal glory.

We begin this 40 week season tonight with ashes on our heads, the same way we do every year. As the ashy grit is smeared on our foreheads we hear the words “remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return”. These ashes are smeared on anyone who comes forward, infants to the aged, the healthy and the sick, without partiality. A reminder that we are all in this together and we will all end the same way. Our return to dust being the great equalizer of life.

I have often heard and imagined these words of remembrance that I am dust to be something of a caution, something of a “don’t get too attached to your body and to this life because it is transitory” warning. But this year, I heard a story that has shifted my view a bit—a story about the aftermath of the 9/11 attack—the day that ashes were not confined to a church but were everywhere in New York. A Port Authority policeman was interviewed and as he spoke, in the background was the groaning of dump trucks, and the hissing and popping of torches cutting through steel. Thirty of his friends had died on September 11, the policeman explained, which was why he could not stay away from the site. When the reporter asked him to describe the scene for those who were listening, he talked about the relief workers who were sifting through the powdered debris on the ground, carrying two handfuls at a time over to a tarp where they searched through it for anything recognizably human. What struck him most, the policeman said, was their utter reverence for what they carried in their hands. “It’s nothing but ashes,” he said, “and yet you should see how they touch it.”

Which puts sort of a different spin on the whole thing for me. It made me think that the good news of Ash Wednesday may not be about the poverty of flesh, not a cautionary tale of the finiteness of life, so much as it is about the holiness of ashes, the truth that ashes are worthy of all reverence. It was God, after all who decided to breathe on them, God who chose to bring them to life. God who saw the infinite potential in dust and so created a universe. We are certainly dust and to dust we shall return, but in the meantime our bodies are sources of deep revelation for us. They are how we come to know both great pain and great pleasure. They help us to recognize ourselves in one another. They are how God gets to us, at the most intimate and universal level of all. They are a sacred gift from the God who gave us life and who chose to share it with us, in exactly the same flesh, the same dust, as you and me.

Bodies frighten us too, of course—not only when they are sick or dirty but also when they are passionate or demanding—which may be why we are so often tempted to think of ourselves as essential spirits, built for soaring, instead. But believers in the word made flesh are called to resist that temptation, even as we have ashes pressed into our foreheads. Those ashes are not curses. They are blessings instead, announcing God’s undying love of dust no matter what kind of shape it is in.

The next 40 days we will pray, learn, and be fed together here in church as we walk the Lenten path to the cross. Outside of church life will go on—we will experience joy and pain, we may get sick, or have a baby, someone we love may die. We will do all the things that God-breathed dust does. And whatever shape we are in when we get there, Easter will come—with its trumpets, lilies, and skies. But perhaps this year we will get there remembering that whatever else Easter is about, it is about remembering this truth—the truth of God’s undying love of dust.

To give us strength for the journey, and to serve as a reminder of God’s irrational fondness for dust, here is a Lenten blessing from poet Jan Richardson.

All those days you felt like dust, like dirt, as if all you had to do was turn your face toward the wind and be scattered to the four corners, or swept away by the smallest breath as insubstantial—did you not know what the Holy One can do with dust? This is the day we freely say we are scorched. This is the hour we are marked by what has made it through the burning. This is the moment we ask for the blessing that lives within the ancient ashes, that makes its home inside the soil of this sacred earth. So let us be marked not for sorrow. And let us be marked not for shame. Let us be marked not for false humility or for thinking we are less than we are but 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>1</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Jan Richardson, *Blessing the Dust*, from *Circle of Grace*