

Sacred Dust
Ash Wednesday
February 26, 2020

Along with millions and millions of other sacramentally-minded Christians, tonight we begin the season of Lent by feeling ashes being smudged on our heads in the shape of a cross... and hearing the familiar words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

I confess that until recently, I heard these words negatively... almost like as a negative indictment of flesh... almost like a curse. As grateful I am for my body and as good as God may have made me, what I heard on Ash Wednesday is that I'm not THAT good! And that I shouldn't get too attached to this flesh... because it's only temporary... made of perishable stuff.

But then, two things spoke to me about ashes... one many years ago and the other more recently. The first voice came weeks after September 11, 2001. On that morning, our television screens were full of ashes.... the air in Manhattan was choked with ashes... faces and hair were covered in ashes... hearts around the world were full of ashes. Weeks after the attacks, a Port Authority policeman was interviewed on the radio. As he spoke, you could hear the dump trucks in the background... the hissing and popping of cutting torches working on steel. He explained that thirty of his friends had died that day.... which was why he couldn't bring himself to leave the site. When the reporter asked him to describe the scene for those who were listening... what he talked about was the relief workers who were sifting through the powdered debris on the ground... each worker 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."

The second, and more recent voice, comes out of the fascinating study of cosmology... and particularly the idea that the origin of everything happened in one single event we've come to know as the Big Bang. Now, people much smarter than me have said that the big bang's simplest insight... (and the one with the most profound impact for our understanding of God...) is that everything that exists was created at the same time... and that because everything that exists was created at the same time, all things are connected... because they came from the same matter. Dated at 13.7 billion years ago (give or take), the universe began when a single speck exploded, sending forth all the matter that will ever exist. I'll let theologian, Elizabeth Johnson, take it from here: Out of the big bang, the stars; out of the stardust, the Earth; out of the matter of the Earth, life. Out of the life and death of single-celled creatures: trilobites, fish, amphibians, insects, flowers, birds, reptiles, and mammals.

According to this scientific theory, absolutely everything is connected with everything else – "Every atom of iron in our blood would not be there, had it not been produced in some galactic explosion billions of years ago..." Quite literally, human beings are made of stardust."¹

¹ Elizabeth Johnson, "For God So Loved the Cosmos," *U.S. Catholic*, April 2010.

Well, what these two stories say to me is that whatever these ashes we wear tonight say about us – that we sin and fall short of God’s glory... that we are mortal and one day will die – whatever these ashes say about us: they are NOT negative indictments of human flesh... they are not curses. No, they are blessings that announce God’s undying love for dust! From dust God created everything that is... from dust God shaped and formed each of us and called us very good... and from that same dust, God... the Word... became flesh and lived among us. This all-holy God came to us – sharing with us the signature of supernovas and a common genetic ancestry - God came to us as one of us... made OF dust... out of love FOR dust.

So, in just a moment Heather is going to invite us to observe a holy Lent. She will suggest that we use all of the traditional ways to do this: prayer, fasting, self-examination and penitence, reading of Scripture, acts of generosity and service... and I commend all of those practices to you. However, along with whatever else you may do to devote yourself to God this Lent, allow me to suggest a Lenten practice that will allow you to keep your chocolate. Very simply – every day for the next forty days – remember that you are dust... remember that God’s earth was here long before us, and it will be here long after us. Remember this earth and all of its goodness does not belong to us. It is here for us to explore and enjoy and find God in... But it does not belong to us and it is not for us to destroy and use up. Remember that you share with all other living creatures on our planet a common genetic ancestry – worms, pine trees, blueberries, horses, the great gray whales... you are genetic kin to them all. Remember that you are called to protect all of it from ourselves and others... and that when you fail in that sacred duty, you are called once more, to repent and to try again. Remember that you are dust... stardust! Know that you are fearfully and wonderfully made – you came from the ashes of miraculous stellar transformations that are far beyond our ability to comprehend... and one day you will return to this incredible process of divine creation and recreation. And finally, remember that we humans have been given a very unique and wonderful calling within God’s amazing creation – we are, as Jewish philosopher, Abraham Heschel, says: we are the “cantors or the universe” – uniquely able to sing praise and offer thanks to God on behalf of all other sacred dust.