

Ash Wednesday 2018
Church of the Holy Trinity, Middletown CT

So what exactly is “dust” to us? I know that on a day-to-day basis dust is an annoyance to me. It is something against which I battle, as it quietly coats every surface of my house. Briefly, I can hold it back with a cloth and some furniture polish or banish it into the confines of my vacuum cleaner. But just as I turn my back, it steals its way into my life again and appears to mock my puny attempts to drive it from my sight.

Dust is something which makes me crazy, but it is a fact of life. So dust, like mosquitos, is added to my long list of things about which I wish to question the Almighty someday. What good purpose does dust serve? It seems to be the lowliest thing in all creation. We constantly walk on it. We curse by it: “Even lower than the dust under your feet...!” we say. In the Bible, Jesus tells us to shake it from our sandals to indicate our ability to let go of things which might cause us to stumble along The Way.

Well, how appropriate dust must be, then, to describe ourselves on Ash Wednesday. Isn't this the day when we are supposed to realize just how sinful and corrupt and lowly we have become? Aren't we supposed to be seeing all the dust which has accumulated on our spiritual selves so that we can undertake the housecleaning which is Lent? Isn't it perhaps the correct liturgical movement for us to debase ourselves, crawling around in the dust, so we can all the more appreciate the glorious resurrection at Easter when Christ tramples down death and lifts us with him to eternal life?

Don't you just hate dust, and isn't dust a highly appropriate way for us to describe ourselves today? Remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return!

This year, as I read over the Ash Wednesday service to prepare to lead it, the first sentence of our opening Collect jumped off the page at me: “Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made....” You hate nothing you have made. And what has God made, I asked myself? Everything. So, if God hates nothing God has made, then God does not hate any part of Creation. In fact, Genesis tells us that on each day of the making of it, God found it to be good—very good. Now, it stands to reason that the monumental building project of everything must have created a lot of collateral dust. And just think of what God did with that dust. God created the first human beings and the first animals out of the dust, and enlivened them with God’s own breath, God’s Spirit. Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

God does not hate the dust. God, in fact, loved the dust. God ennobled the dust forever by using it as a primary building block for what was to be the dwelling place of God’s own breath. Truly, we do not always live up to this inheritance and it is a good thing to recall that and to work on correcting our course of life—getting our spiritual groove back. However, if we were to fall into hating ourselves, into discouragement and despair, that would not be aligned with how God sees us. God hates nothing God has created. God loves even the dust. Especially the dust.

Goodness knows, we humans have chosen to abuse our privileges as bearers of God’s creative Spirit. We have breathed plenty of hate into God’s good creation. And that has to stop. That is why we all need the special remembrance of Lent. It is a time for returning to our dusty roots, reclaiming their holiness. It is a time for us to see dust the way God sees it: as something full of promise. All it needs is a little Divine breath. And that is what we are seeking here today: to be reconnected with that Divine Breath which can hallow our dustiness.

I close with a poem by Methodist Pastor and author, Jan Richardson. She calls it:

Blessing the Dust
A Blessing for Ash Wednesday

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.

—Jan Richardson

The Rev. Dana L. Campbell, Interim Rector