

Ash Wednesday Ecumenical Service

14 February 2024

Message – Growing in Wonder

Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life, reveal in us your image and your love. **Amen.**

Dust you are, and to dust you shall return.

Turn from sin and be faithful to the gospel.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.

These words, in whatever form, carry sombreness, sadness, perhaps even lament. They remind us of the second creation narrative of Genesis, of Adam and Eve being sent forth from the Garden of Eden. It is easy to hear the sending forth as God's punishment for disobedience but the narrative is more open than that. The sending forth is a consequence of disobedience, of choosing a different path, and even in the sending forth we see that God cares for the man and woman. Whatever we do, God's care for us is undiminished. The image of dust also reminds us of our mortality, that our life on earth is finite, and in that, that life is precious.

Our gospel reading directs us that, though we may feel the sense of sadness, lament, and seriousness, in this season of Lent, our outward expression should not convey this to those around us. Our inner reflections and meditations and the ways in which we fall short of God's hope for us, should not become a burden to others.

Our gospel reading also directs us that our personal spiritual practices, our time spent consciously in God's presence is not to be paraded, to show how wonderful we are or what great faith we have, implicitly demeaning the practices of others. Our personal spiritual practices are to be between us and God. We may occasionally share our experiences with others, when we are sure it may help, but more often than not the thing others will find more helpful is knowing what a struggle our spiritual practices are, which will hardly put us in a good light, just a humble and honest one! God can always work through our weakness.

Despite the gospel's directions, it is sobering and somewhat hard to feel joy when we hear the words, '*dust you are and to dust you shall return.*' The word dust carries a sense of insignificance, the everyday stuff that is around us and that usually finds its way to places where we don't want it.

Yet, the word dust is also a word filled with wonder. As a physicist, I love cosmology, using science to try to understand the creation of the universe. However, you view God's creative act, the story that is built into creation is truly amazing. For there to be life, it seems that we need this extravagant universe that is vast beyond our imagining. Yes, we are a tiny part of the universe but we have been given the gift of wonder, of insight, of glimpsing the deep mysteries of our God. We may be small but in some mysterious way, this entire universe is here so that we can be here and can be in relationship with God.

That does not mean that the universe is ours to abuse, rather God has given us life through the universe and it is ours to treasure. It tells us about our creator.

The next amazing thing about dust is that, in the vastness of the universe, it is quite rare! Most of the visible mass of the universe is made up of hydrogen and helium, which don't make for anything very complex, as interesting as stars are. The heavier elements are created when a large star dies and explodes. We are not talking little, yellow dwarf, stars like our sun, we are talking far larger stars.

The story that the stars tell us is that there was an earlier generation of massive stars before our current stars, these burnt brightly and quickly and, when they burnt up, they collapsed through a number of stages, depending on their size, these later stages and the final explosion created the carbon and heavier elements, of which we are made, with the explosion scattering those necessary elements across the galaxy. When we say we are made of dust, we are acknowledging that we are made of star dust. That is something truly wonderful and mysterious.

Our God is outrageously extravagant in the creation of life, life in the image of God. When we hear, '*dust you are and to dust you shall return.*' we should be humbled, filled with awe and wonder, and filled with joy and hope. God will do all this and more for God's children. God has provided us with the way we need to follow and the truth we need to know.

The image of star dust also reminds us of the mystery of the interconnectedness of all creation. Not only are we dependent on the first generations of stars for life but the warmth of the sun, our star, gives the energy for most of the forms of life on our planet. As we explore more, we find that thermal vents too can provide the energy needed for life, energy arising more directly from the creation of

the earth. Dust, free of outside influences, moves towards chaos, yet energy and life bring order out of that chaos. It is God's good design.

All the understanding and explanations that science provides lead to our perceiving an ever more wonderful and mysterious universe. And, the theories of quantum mechanics tell us that all matter is entangled, but that is for another time.

This Lent, sit with the reality '*dust you are and to dust you shall return.*' Not by putting on dust and ashes but by seeing the wonder and mystery that is all around us. Allow yourself to experience awe, in the beauty of a sunset, the clouds, a forest, the sea, the abundant life all around us, the beauty of the dust that God created. Allow the beauty of the universe, God's first testament, to speak to your heart, your mind, and your soul.

And, allow yourself to experience awe in the beauty that people create, in music, in art, in drama, in poetry, in compassion, in relationships; the beauty of the dust that God has created and the dust to whom God breathed life and offered the gift of co-creation, each one of us.

When this awe touches our deepest being it will move us to indeed '*turn away from sin and faithful to Christ.*' Seeing the beauty all around us we will want others to know that beauty too and so our actions will become the actions of Christ in the body of Christ. We will know a peace and joy beyond expectation and that others will want to know too and which we will long to share.

This Lent may we open our eyes to the wonder that God has placed all around us, and in it may we find peace, hope, and joy. Amen. Amen.