

February 14, 2024  
The First Day of Lent, Ash Wednesday  
Grace Church, Muncie  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, Rector

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

*Psalm 103:8-14*

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

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

In the Name of God. Amen.

Today, Ash Wednesday is, in the first instance, a day of memory. In a few moments, you will be invited to have an ashen cross traced on your brow, with the words *Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return*. The same cross that was made with water at your baptism is renewed today with ashes. For some, this visible sign is the very paradox of Ash Wednesday: lining up to receive ashes in apparent defiance of the Gospel: *Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them*.

But the remembering part isn't simply important; it's essential. The Psalmist reminds us that God remembers who we are, for it is God who formed us out of the dust and breathed the life into us. In remembering that we are dust, we remember two truths. First, God hates nothing that God has made. Second, God sees our transgressions, and by God's mercy removes them *as the heavens are high above the earth*.

Now is the acceptable time to remember because we are prone to amnesia about who we really are. Remembering that we are dust is not to ponder our nothingness. Remembering that we are dust is an affirmation of our humanity. Remembering that we are dust is an invitation to live more deeply, taking advantage of every breath that God gives to seek right relationship with God, with others, and with all of God's creation.

The liturgy today is packed to the rafters with words. And a lot of those words can feel heavy, even grim. It's possible to slip into a rut of shame and self-loathing – when the ashes can feel like a big “L” for loser on our foreheads rather than a loving caress from a loving Creator. So, I want to use fewer words today, and offer a poem that speaks less to the ears of the head, and more to the ears of the heart.

**Blessing the Dust: *For Ash Wednesday***

by 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.

My beloved friends in Christ, now is the acceptable time...to remember.

A blessed Lent to you all. Amen.