

Ash Wednesday, 2023

*By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.
Genesis 3:19*



On Ash Wednesday we Christians go to church, pray a solemn liturgy, and are marked on the forehead with the sign of the cross made from ashes as a sign of our mortality and penitence. As the ashes are imposed the pastor says to each person, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

In the natural order of things we do indeed return to the dust of the earth...a slow decay that replenishes the soil from which new life eventually springs forth. So, perhaps we should look upon Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent that it sets in motion as a time of renewal, of rebirth, of new life instead of a reminder of death.

Church historian, Diana Butler Bass writes in her book Grounded, "We are animated dirt. Soil and life joined. From living grounds we were made; to living ground we will return." This is a part of what we refer to as "the circle of life" which has been going on for eons since God first spoke creation into existence and made everything we see and everything still invisible to us.



Perhaps this whole idea that we are made from dust and will return to dust is a shockingly beautiful concept. Dust, after all is made from exploding stars and from all the life that ever existed on earth. It carries the memories of billions of years, of immense wisdom, and of lives lived long ago. Through the dust we are connected so deeply with all that has come before and all that will ever be.

For years, along with many of you, I have perceived this idea that I will return to the dust as a sad, sad Ash Wednesday reminder but now I am amazed by it. My body is connected to ancient matter, distant stars, to all living things...we all share the same stuff.

Diana Butler-Bass continues, "The church has always emphasized this verse (Genesis 3:19) as penitence in anticipation of death. You came from nothing...you return to nothing. This is the starkest of all reminders of fleeting existence, the ever-present reminder of death. But this verse also points in another direction - not toward death but toward creation."

Earlier in Genesis (Genesis 2:6-7) we hear these words, "...but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground - then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the grounds and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being."

Dust may be our ending, but it was also our beginning. Dust and ash are reminders of our mortality and calls us to repentance, but dust is also the stuff of creation. Again, Diana Butler-Bass comments, "Deserts do bloom. Charred landscapes birth new forests. From dust and ash come flowers and trees and fruitful fields. Dust is not nothing; ash is not nothing. Dust and ash are necessary for life."

Perhaps Ash Wednesday and the entire season of Lent is not so much about our mortality and our need for repentance as it is about renewal, new life, and rebirth. So, let us pray for that which will be reborn in our spiritual hearts and renewed in our daily lives these forty days that will bring us closer to God, to God's amazing creation, and to one another.

