

Prayer: As we hesitantly enter into the season of Lent, permit us to follow you, Jesus, not only to Tabor but especially to Calvary. Amen.

Dirty Hands – An Ash Wednesday Reflection

We've just encountered the glory of Transfiguration Sunday, and suddenly we're plunged into the solemn reminder that we are fragile earth beings, made of dust and returning to the dust when we die. The suddenness of this transition can sometimes make us veer into one extreme or another. Some might decide not to make a big deal of Ash Wednesday, to downplay the importance of confession, repentance, and grappling with our frailty.

Lent is bookended with Ash Wednesday and Good Friday; Ash Wednesday is not about over-anticipating the crucifixion. Instead, Ash Wednesday is about refocusing and realigning ourselves in relationship to God and one another. We must encounter our sinfulness and frailty not with shame and blame but with honesty and truth, trusting that God receives our confession. During this Lenten journey, live into the prayer of confession and repentance as an anchor for this holy journey. Infuse your confession with honest naming and recognition of your individual sin. Let your confession testify to the realities of the brokenness in our world that we perpetuate. Jesus will guide us into words and acts of repentance that are as robust as our confession. We will celebrate,—yes, I said celebrate—that God's grace empowers us to turn from sin and toward God.

To prepare for the imposition of the ashes, I dragged the tip of my finger through them; my hands start to tremble, which caught me by surprise. My mouth was dry, and the words were caught in my throat - "Remember you are dust..."

Dust.

The ashes can seem like a burden being placed on your forehead. I marked the sign of the cross on you, and I say the words, but I feel myself racing to get to the promise at the very end.

"Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return, but the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever."

I looked down at my hands, and they were dirty. I think back to past Ash Wednesday services, and I will even reflect on this one as I remembered placing the ashes on each of your forehead who will come forward. I am blessed and fortunate to know you as a child of God. I know your stories. I know many of the losses you have suffered, the joys celebrated. I look into each person's eyes, and see hurts and joys and wonderings and questions.

After everyone has come forward, I will turn and received a cross of ashes on my forehead, too. All of us are on a journey together, wandering, stumbling, seeking, glimpsing.

I looked down at my hands, and they're dirty.

The ash and oil mixed together and seemed almost to seep inside my skin. I wiped at it with a cloth so that I could continue on with the service, but I couldn't wash it all away.

"Remember you are dust..."

"...then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." – Genesis 2:7

Formed from the dust. The God of Creation drew near and formed humanity from the dust. From the grit and the soil and the perishable, the Imperishable God created us.

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us..." – John 1:14a

We were created from the dust, but that was not enough. God entered into our midst and became one of us – one made from the dust – because God is not afraid to enter in and get hands dirty.

And as we gather together and embark upon the journey of Lent, we are following in the footsteps of the one who made mud with his hands to bring restoration of sight (John 9:6), the one who wrote with his finger in the dirt (John 8:8), the one who ate with the outcasts (Matthew 9:11, and elsewhere), and wept over the loss of his friend (John 11:35).

Ash Wednesday's earthiness is no accident. It draws us back to the creation of the world and of humanity. It grips us as we recall our own mortality. And it invites us to enter the places in our lives where we need to get our hands dirty.

For a fleeting moment, we will be able to look around and see everyone marked with ashes – indicative of the burden we bear as humanity – but also marked with a cross as a reminder of our deepest and truest selves.

Lent is an inner journey that extends beyond ourselves.

We are following in the footsteps of one who got his hands dirty, who reached out and touched those who needed it most, ate with those deemed unworthy by society, and had no place to lay his head, Jesus the precious Lamb of God.

We are dust and to dust we shall return. This is a statement of truth, not confession. We are called to repent and believe the Gospel so that we can live in the truth of our beautiful frailty and dependence on God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

This Lenten journey is about setting aside everything that the world says matters and enjoying communion with God. Ash Wednesday is about setting an agenda to focus on that relationship.

Lent - an imperative to go and do likewise. Amen.