

Ash Wednesday 22 February 2023
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

In the Name of the one who is with us in every wilderness.

'Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.' These are the ancient, traditional, scriptural words the Church gives us to say when we impose ashes on the faithful.

'Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.' – as a cross is marked in ashes on our foreheads.

In baptism a similar cross is signed on our foreheads with the words, 'you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.' With that signing we are assured of eternity. We are permanently connected to God and the people of God. And everyone gladly affirms this assurance with an enthusiastic, 'Amen.' Which means 'So be it!' in Hebrew. It seems a very appropriate affirmation of a wonderful thing.

It may seem surprising that some people also respond 'Amen.' 'So be it!' to the words with the ashes, 'Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.'

Remember that you are destined to die – so be it.

Remember that your life will end – so be it.

This is not something that we humans generally like to affirm. We do not wish to die, to be limited in any way. But knowing that we are limited by death and all the other facts of mortality removes a burden from our hearts.

First of all, it is good to know that God recognizes our limitation, does not expect of us more than is possible for any human. Amen.

It is good to know that God accepts the little I can do and makes it enough. So be it.

It is good to know that I personally, or even we as a community, are not expected to solve all the problems of the world, to singlehandedly reconcile the world to God and its people to one another. Amen.

It is good to know that God in Christ takes on all of these burdens, inviting us to join him, taking what part we can, whatever our limitations. So be it.

In his Ring Trilogy, JRR Tolkien's elves speak of mortality as a gift. From the Elven perspective, this makes perfect sense. The Elves are doomed to live on endlessly, watching what they love most change remorselessly until one after another, all things wither and die. Humans and hobbits are given the gift of limited time in which to do their best and then to pass on, letting go and leaving the work to those who come after. Remember that you are dust. Amen.

Of course, this does not absolve us of caring and doing our very best to build the Kingdom of God where we are within our limited scope. The prophets regularly remind us that the religious duty that God desires of us is to change our lives in ways that care for those in need, ways that build up community, ways that make a better world for everyone, ways that bring God's Kingdom closer to our lived reality. Amen.

But our limitation, our dusty nature, does absolve us of the ultimate responsibility. It is not all up to me, up to us. We are part of a whole and our job is to recognize and affirm that, to accept our individual limitations and join the great work of the Body. Amen.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. This also affirms our oneness with Earth, with the rest of creation. We are not something separate, something other, alone. We are of the earth, part of the great web of life growing on and from the earth. Children of Adam, children of Earth, children of the God who created both. Amen.

I once heard a Jesuit preacher talk about Lent as 'God's growing season.' He reminded us of a unique aspect of being English-speaking Christians. Our word 'Lent' comes from an old word for 'lengthen.' The word itself has nothing to do with fasting or penitence. It has to do with Spring, the time in the northern hemisphere when the days lengthen, when the light increases and things begin to grow again. God's growing season.

The imposition of ashes does focus on our limited, mortal nature. But it is also calling us back to the beginning, when God created human beings, indeed all earthly beings, out of the dust of the earth. Each time God created, God proclaimed it good. When we recall this moment of creation, we recall the love of God that breathed life into this inanimate world. We are dust, God's beloved dust, God's alone forever.

We are God's beloved dust, with all the limitations of mortal, earthly life – and we are also God's beloved children, one in Christ forever. As dust of the created world, we are fertile ground for growth, for producing fruit, for productive

change. God builds his garden in this dust.

Lent is a time for us to grow, to grow in faith, in discipline, in holiness of life, in prayerfulness. We are about to hear the wonderful Invitation to a Devout and Holy Lent, which invites us into this growing season:

We prepare ourselves, make ourselves receptive, to the action of God in this season, as it says in the invitation, “by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.”

These are our tools, our methods of cleansing and growing to get ready for the great and mysterious celebration of Easter, of Jesus’ passing over from Death to New Life. Self-examination and repentance, prayer, fasting, self-denial, reading and meditating on God’s Holy Word.

Self-examination and repentance: we look at ourselves, at our lives and our habits. We attempt to take a God’s eye view and see what needs improvement. Once we have seen that, we admit it and resolve to change what needs changing.

Prayer: time with God, listening attentively.

Fasting: a traditional way of making space for the holy within us, by letting our stomachs be a little empty, thus reminding ourselves of our emptiness which only God can fill.

Self-denial: trying to follow not our selfish impulses, but the impulses of the Spirit.

Reading and Meditating on God’s Holy Word: more time to read scripture and devotional writings; and especially more time to let those words work in our minds and hearts to transform us.

These are our tools, the ways in which we can intentionally weed and till our inner gardens and open ourselves to the work that God wants to do in us.

Lent is God’s growing season, and we are of Earth, God’s good garden. And our growing is fertilized by ashes and manure, The waste products of our spiritual lives provide the food for growth. So we can think of each unhealthy habit we cast aside as part of the fertilizer, part of what God will use to help us grow full and strong and healthy.

Remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Amen. So be it.

If we allow God to change us in ways we may not even imagine, then we will see the great Paschal Mystery, the wonder of Easter, with new eyes. We will recognize the great new thing that God has done, and we will truly rejoice.

I wish you all a devout and holy Lent, a time of genuine transformation, leading you to new and unique joys. Amen.