

We are made of stardust, the scientists say—the iron in our blood, the calcium in our bones, and the chlorine in our skin forged in the furnaces of ancient stars whose explosions scattered the elements across the galaxy. From the ashes grew new stars, and around one of them, a system of planets and asteroids and moons. A cluster of dust coalesced to form the earth, and life emerged from the detritus of eight-billion-year-old deaths.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

A beautiful pondering from the late Rachel Held Evans.

Friends, it is Lent.

Again.

It was on the third Sunday of Lent that we held our last service in the Sanctuary before moving to online worship which is where we have been for the better part of 11 months.

I know that this sign post through the Liturgical calendar reads differently this year because of what it signifies about our drastically changes lives, personally and communally.

It is also the day of the Knox-Metropolitan United Church Annual Meeting.

This is the second year now that we've held our Annual Meeting on the first Sunday of Lent, and there is a strange beauty in that.

Now we have not, in recent memory, had a practice of holding an Ash Wednesday service.

So, on the first Sunday of Lent, the past two years, we've invited worshippers to be

If they so choose

Marked

Whether on the forehead or the back of hand

With ashes

Made from the burning of the last years' palm branches

Mixed with the oil we use to mark those who are being baptized As God's own beloved

And with that action we hear these words

We are dust. And to Dust we shall return. Thanks be to God.

We are mortal and finite.

But the words with which I began, written by the late Rachel Held Evans, one of the clearest and most beautiful voices in the new evangelical progressive emergence, remind us that dust is not just that which we sweep up from our kitchen floors.

Dust is that which burst forth in the brilliance with which it all began!

We are mortal and finite – walking, breathing, talking, loving, hurting...miracles of life!

*In and with God,
we can direct our lives toward right relationship
with each other and with God.
We can discover our place as one strand in the web of life.
We can grow in wisdom and compassion.
We can recognize all people as kin.
We can accept our mortality and finitude, not as a curse,
but as a challenge to make our lives and choices matter.*

I will totally own, that the Christian Tradition of smearing burnt up palm branches mixed with oil onto foreheads is a bit on the odd side, especially since we do so to remind one another that we all die.

But we also do it to remember the truth...that along the way, amidst all of the beauty, that we fail, harm one another, lose things that we love, but also grow, learn, mature, repair, restore, pick up broken pieces and put them back together, or use them to make something new.

We come to a clearer understanding of our world, and our role in it, and pray and struggle for justice, for the flourishing of all beings.

For Tikkun Olam – the Healing of the World.

The First Sunday of Lent is always accompanied by a reading of one of the Gospel accounts of Jesus entering the desert.

This year, the Lectionary offers us the version from the Book of Mark.

Mark is the shortest, and generally agreed to be the first of the Gospels to have been written, and there is great consensus that the writings called Matthew and Luke used what we now call Mark as their source material adding to it things from their respective communities.

Mark being the shortest however, and most scant on details means that in this Lectionary cycle, we re-read Jesus' baptism before we enter the desert.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

These two stories are right next to each other in the Matthew and Luke accounts as well, but because of their length, in the worshipping life of the church, they are read and pondered on separate Sundays, with most of the 6-9 weeks of Epiphany between the Baptism of Jesus and the first Sunday of Lent.

So Mark really challenges readers to hold beloved tightly as a Lenten invitation.

The great Rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel offers this...

[That the religious calling is]...to be maladjusted with positive moral force, neither indifferently conformed to the reality of evil and suffering, nor inured to wondrous and redemptive possibilities we can make real.

The way there includes lamentation for our losses, learning the difference between being a spectator or bearing witness, and a sacred understanding of memory as far more than contact with information about the past.

Lent is not I would humbly suggest, about moral perfection, or even, if I may, self-improvement.

Lent, I believe is about truth-telling.

Bearing witness.

And, to use Rabbi Heschel's words, through lament, the sacred act of remembrance, to bear witness, and in so doing awake to realities that our usual inclinations allow us to miss, or perhaps better put, force us to ignore.

To recognize where within and around we individually and societally have structured our existence in ways that mar the fundamental belovedness, the fundamental divine spark of beauty and creativity, and to seek to disentangle ourselves to see afresh and live into new possibilities.

To become maladjusted to injustice and apathetic acquiescence, and to learn to approach with curiosity and question.

How might we make different decisions when our own selves and our world are more clearly legible to us?

It is of course, coincidence that our Annual Meeting is our first Lenten experience again this year, but it invites curious introspection about the connect between the two. I can imagine a practice in which all who address the meeting begin with something like:

I acknowledge that I am dust, and that to dust I shall return, and I would like to move that the minutes to be accepted as amended.

Would we make decisions differently in the light of the bigger picture?

*We can accept our mortality and finitude, not as a curse,
but as a challenge to make our lives and choices matter.*

Would there be some things we wouldn't find ourselves as stressed out about, and other things that we might find take on a deeper significance?

Would we view one another differently were we to focus on the smudge on their forehead as they spoke, having been reminded that they, like us, love and hurt, hope and fear?

Would we say different things if we were conscious of that in those we address?

What if working through tough stuff as a community, learning to be gentle but not enabling, reminded by the smudge we bear of each other's (and our own) inherent worth mingled with struggle, and allow all of that to fuel a commitment each other's humanity, and to hold one another in our hurting and suffering.

What if the ashes on our foreheads were guides – like when we stick the names of notes on piano keys when we're just learning to play?

I wish I could offer you ashes today.

That opportunity to externalize and visualize for ourselves an intention to walk a path is powerful.

The Liturgical calendar is like one of those maps that guides us to and through unfamiliar space.

On this day that map guides into a space of wild, inviting us to go humble and observantly, not to be punished or diminished

But to be opened up

To see things more clearly

I began the service with words from Jan Richardson, whose poetic blessings I turn to often.

It is with her words that I will close this reflection...

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.

Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.

Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
That is what
this journey is for.

I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear,
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun

or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.

I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.

I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:

Beloved.
Beloved
Beloved