

Ash Wednesday, March 6, 2019
 Pastor Dan Hollis

On Ash Wednesday, we remember the words from Genesis 3:19, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” It always reminds me of that beautiful old song from the band Kansas: “All we are is dust in the wind.” And—hear me out—I think those words are actually full of hope.

On Ash Wednesday, we recognize the beginning of the church season of Lent. Lent is an opportunity for us to take our spirits down through the dark valley that leads up to the joy of Easter, and the empowering and celebratory messages of the resurrection of Christ. It’s a time where we focus on the ways we fall short, the ways our lives could change for the better, and yes, on what we’ve done wrong. But it’s not about crushing our souls *into* the dust, or convincing ourselves we just *terrible*, or about wallowing in our own insignificance. The Christian message of “we’re all sinners in our own different ways” has *never* ended in a period. God doesn’t lead us into a dark valley without a way up and out, and God certainly doesn’t lead us into the depths of Lent without a purpose.

In our lives, depression’s not hard to find. For many depression is the default, the way life is wired. But even in a time as focused on our own shortcomings as Lent can be, God doesn’t seek to crush us into the dust and grind us in with God’s boot-heel. That’s not the “dust” cliché we’re operating under. I don’t see Lent, or Ash Wednesday, as belittling at all. In fact, I find it empowering.

Beginning with the imposition of Ashes on our foreheads tonight, and walking together through the next 46 days, we are called to a period of self-reflection. Of recognizing and seeking to understand the ways that we fall short, and of discovering the ways that Christ’s new life in *our* lives can transform us.

From dust we have come, and to dust we shall return. We are made of stardust, a collection of atoms and molecules that blow through life in a moment before scattering to the winds of time. But I think that that very *dust*-ness of our lives—the transient, temporary, *quickness* that is the human lifespan on this ball of dust circling the sun—is a huge part of what makes it beautiful. What gives our lives *promise*.

In Lent we remember that we are dust, our lives are quick and prone to blow away at any moment. And *that’s* what’s empowering. We have only *moments* to make meaning in our lives... and when we remember *that* our very dustiness becomes a rallying cry! The Declaration of Independence says that our inalienable rights are for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But when Thomas Jefferson wrote those words, he was drawing from an ancient philosophy, one that

goes back to a time when the word “happiness” was drawn from the Greek “eudaimonia.” The pursuit of eudaimonia. Of *flourishing* life. Human *fullness*. Fullness of meaning and purpose.

When we remember that we come from dust and soon enough we shall scatter to the winds, the call to a life full of meaning becomes all the more important. We cling to the skin of this planet for such a short time, and Jesus came to show us the way to make the most of the time we have. None of us ever *fully* lives into the blessing of this life, and we never will—there’s too much good to do, too much richness to discover, too much betterment to better... but Lent is a time for us to really take stock. To put some real time into figuring out where it is we fall short of God’s calling and Jesus’ example, and to allow that knowledge to transform us to be better. Fuller. To welcome the guidance and the power of the Holy Spirit into us—the *wind* of the Holy Spirit—to blow the dust that we are in the right directions. To enrich ourselves and enrich the lives of all the other dust clods we have the blessing of spending these beautiful moments with. To be a part of bringing God’s life, liberty, and *eudaimonia* to all we meet, our own broken selves included.

Beginning tonight, we enter into a dark valley. A valley lined with mirrors that show us all the blemishes, all the shortcomings, all the ways we could do better. But the good shepherd leads us by the hand through that dark valley to the green pastures beyond. To a land of flourishing life.

We have the blessing of this time, that each year we have the opportunity to get a little better, and a little better. To spit on our hands and rub that dust into mud, and to shape that mud into something new and beautiful and *full*.

From dust we come, and to dust we shall return, but I truly believe that if we follow the way of the shepherd, if we open our lives to the transformation Jesus can wreak in each of us, then to dust we shall return... with a little something extra we didn’t start out with. That all the dust out there, ours included, will be better for the time we spent blowing through this life.

That’s the empowerment of this time. That’s the message of the dark valley we are stepping into now. Not to wallow in the mud of our failures, but to truly *see* our lives, and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus to make something truly beautiful out of our brief, dusty little lives.

Jesus was all God, but He was also all human. All *dust*. Let us follow the examples we find in His own short, dusty little life... and when we return to God, may we return transformed. And may that transformation start today.

Amen.