

“What God Can Do With Dust”

Ash Wednesday

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Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Teaneck Presbyterian Church

“Remember, mortal, you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” These are some of the most frightening and at the same time reassuring words a pastor can say. It’s not like we need reminders of our mortality. As I was coming home from work today I learned there was a mass shooting in Milwaukee. After a season of brush fires that have ripped across Australia, wreaking destruction, and leaving a landscape covered in ash and dust, we feel the fear in these words: remember, you are dust. Will we become dust like those trees and animals that were destroyed by raging heat? And of course many of us have COVID-19 on our minds; we have watched from a safe distance the suffering happening in China, and how it has taken hold in countries far from there like Italy, and we wonder when and how badly it will hit us here. My friend Steven Jiang, who is a Chinese journalist for CNN living in Beijing, wrote me the other day saying, “The fear of physical infection is one thing. But the emotional impact is another thing. We are a country living with PTSD right now.” My heart aches for him and his 2-year old daughter, and all those living under the isolation, anxiety, and despair this disease has brought, in addition to the costs to physical health and life.

If all this hat isn’t enough, I happened to glance over at a birthday card my daughter, who turned 8 this month, wrote to her friend who turns 8 tomorrow.

Given these challenges in our world today, it is a funny thing you have shown up to receive ashes and be reminded of the truth that one day, you too will die.

But I did say that it can be a very reassuring thing for a pastor to talk about death with parishioners. There have been a number of times I have gone visiting to people with a terminal illness, and while their loved ones are still in the “we’re going to fight this” mode, I try to speak the truth. A couple of years ago there was a man in my church-- not much older than me-- who was dying of cancer. He had decided to stop with the chemotherapy and pills that made him feel sicker even as they went to battle against a cancer they would never win. “How do you feel about dying?” I asked him. He felt so much relief that I was able to invite him into that conversation when his loved ones were still holding on to the possibility that he might get better. Although he had never participated in an Ash Wednesday service growing up, he asked that I bring ashes to his home. For him and those around him, it was a dress rehearsal for his death, which

followed not too long after. That opened up conversations, shared wisdom, and words of love that could be shared while he was still living, and have continued to be gifts to his family long after he is gone.

We will receive ashes tonight, and I expect some will receive them with fear; some will receive them with reassurance; and most of us will receive ashes with some combination of both. If it makes you feel vulnerable, well, that's okay. It's supposed to do that.

In the wake of the wildfires that have burned through Australia, I have learned a bit of wisdom from the Aboriginal traditions there. For hundreds and maybe thousands of years, there was an Aboriginal practice of controlled burning. They would set small fires to clear out bush overgrowth, get rid of an invasive species, or keep the balance in check when one plant, such as eucalyptus, was crowding out the other plants. These practices of setting small fires kept the bigger, ecosystem-destroying fires from happening. However, these and other indigenous practices that cared for the earth largely ended as the Aborigines faced displacement from their homelands, forced assimilation, banning of Indigenous languages, and other practices over centuries following their colonization by the British. Until 1992, Aboriginal people had extremely limited rights to their own land: Australia had previously operated under the idea that the land was "unowned" before colonization and Indigenous people were not legally recognized as traditional stewards. Now, however, those who care about the land are turning back to Aboriginal groups and asking for their help in restoring these ancient practices.

Lent is like a controlled burn. The ashes mark a small, intentional, and cleansing fire in our souls. During this season of 40 days, we can look at what overgrowth has occurred in our lives that keeps us from being in better connection with God and the people God has placed in our lives. We can look at what invasive species have settled on our hearts-- pulling us away from the goodness God made us for. Participating in the controlled burn of Lent helps to re-order and re-balance our lives, so that we do not get overwhelmed when the seasons bring bigger fires to contend with.

Lent is a gift to us that allows us to participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus more fully. We walk that dusty, ash-covered path to the cross, but we know the cross does not get to be the last story of our faith. God shows us, through the dust, that if we must participate in death, we also get to participate in life.

Katherine Johnson died 2 days ago at age 101 and now lives with the ancestors. She grew up in the Jim Crow era, a time and place that was so limiting for young Black children and youth that her family had to move from their farm each year, because the

local school for Black children only went up to 6th grade. Though she was gifted, because of her race and gender she was treated by her country's laws as if she were as insignificant as a speck of dust. Nevertheless, her high intelligence, determined effort, and extreme persistence earned her a place among NASA's top scientists. There, she did the mathematical computations that allowed the first man-- Neil Armstrong-- to walk on the moon.

She herself did not walk on the moon. But her math, done in a laboratory 239,000 miles from the moon, helped to make this walk possible. From the moon's perspective, she was only a speck of dust. But what power this little bit of dust had!

And actually, we are made of the same dust that the stars are made of. As Astrophysicist Karel Schrijver explains, "Stars are like nuclear reactors. They take a fuel and convert it to something else. Hydrogen is formed into helium, and helium is built into carbon, nitrogen and oxygen, iron and sulfur—everything we're made of. When stars get to the end of their lives, they swell up and fall together again, throwing off their outer layers. If a star is heavy enough, it will explode in a supernova.

Most of the material that we're made of comes out of dying stars, or stars that died in explosions. We have stuff in us as old as the universe, and then some stuff that landed here maybe only a hundred years ago. And all of that mixes in our bodies."

God once told Abraham to look out at the night sky. Looking at the stars can make us feel small and significant. But not for Abraham. "See all those stars?" God asked him. "I promise you a nation of descendants that will be even more numerous than the stars." Literally, *we are* those stars!

I loved the story I heard recently about a violinist who had to undergo surgery to remove a brain tumor. Because the tumor was located in a place in the brain that controlled the movements necessary to play the violin, this patient and her surgical team made the decision that she would actually play her violin during this advanced surgery, so that if they harmed any part of her brain that would impact her violin playing, it would be immediately apparent. The surgery was successful.

But the truth is, most of us are not given that much control over our lives. These ashes will invite us to let go of the things we don't have control of, and to be intentional about the things we do have control over. Surgeon Atul Gawande "observes how elderly people often shift their life priorities to being rather than doing, to giving rather than getting, to friendships rather than accomplishments, to family rather than work, and so on — a shift that we acknowledge is a healthier way to live."

“According to the Stanford psychologist Laura Carstensen, contrary to what we might think, it has nothing to do with how old you are. Rather, it has everything to do with what perspective you have — whether young or old, the wisest people understand that life is fragile and time is limited” (Journey with Jesus Dan Clendenen “To See Death Daily” Feb. 22, 2015).

There’s no denying that we are mortal, and we are made of dust. That is a humbling truth. It is an equalizing truth. When looking up to the stars, we aren’t that special. And yet, with just a handful of dust and the breath of Spirit, God put life into us. And those stars that are light years away? They are made of the same dust as us. Science tells us that the stars we see now actually died many years ago, and yet they light up the night. These ashes tell us that there is so much beyond the limits of our knowledge of life and death, but the thing we can be certain of is this truth from our tradition: in life, and in death, we belong to God. With that knowledge, let dare to risk being vulnerable to God and to one another, and see what else the dust can show us.