

ASH
WEDNESDAY

The Rev.
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Ash Wednesday 2012
The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker with thanks to SDO

Ashes to Ashes

Take a deep breath and consider this: a molecule of the air you just breathed may have once passed through the lungs of a dinosaur or maybe even someone like Winston Churchill.

Take a look at your hand: a molecule of your flesh may have once been a part of Mozart's pinky or Sojourner Truth's nose. And that pew you are sitting on: contained in those wood fibers are molecules that may have been part of Noah's ark or a part of the boat that Washington used to cross the Delaware River.

Science tells us that on a cosmic level, "we live, and move and have our being" in a closed system. Nothing is ever lost. According to the Law of the Conservation of Energy, energy cannot be created or destroyed, but energy *can* change form. For example, electric energy can be converted into heat energy.

And the same principle can be applied to matter –to the stuff of the universe, the building blocks of creation----- the very stuff of which all of us are made.

This means that the total amount of matter and energy available in all of God's vast and abundant creation is constantly recycling and renewing itself; never truly disappearing, simply changing. The same cosmic speck that sparked creation is still part of our atmosphere today.¹

Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return. Nothing in God's universe is ever lost.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. In ancient Israel, ashes were symbols of the pervasiveness of human sin and of the inevitability of human death.

This traditional emblem of grief and mourning has been adopted by the Christian church as a sign and symbol of all the ways humanity fails to live up to its divine creation.

Sin is after all, simply failing to do the good for which God created us; sin is the shroud we place over that divine spark within us that prevents us from living the way God intended.

Yet there is even more to this symbolism we employ today. The ashen cross echoes our baptismal anointing, when we were buried with Christ. The ash is a chilling reminder of our mortality, but because our death is now in Christ, our endings are beginnings. Nothing is ever lost.

The words we hear this day are true to the ominous quality of Ash Wednesday. Yet they also point forward to the redemptive power of God's grace.

The words from the prophet Joel resound like an alarm bell in the darkness of night. The crisis is not specified nor is the crisis described in any type of detail, but there is no mistaking the urgency.

Those who are caught in this terrible moment cannot hope to save themselves, for they are basically powerless to do anything on their own behalf. They are powerless to do anything, that is, except to repent and to open themselves up to God's intervening mercy.

As Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth he is acutely aware of the dark power of sin and mortality. Yet Paul understands that God *shares* these concerns with people of faith, and he takes pains to point out that God, not humankind, takes the initiative to set matters right. Jesus Christ is the one who, by the mercy of God, will lead us toward reconciliation with God.

And as Matthew recounts a portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount we hear what on the surface sounds like an extended warning against false and manipulative piety. But, at a deeper level, Jesus' words are a declaration that God always responds in mercy to the faithfulness of those who attempt to do God's will.

In just a little while we will read together from Psalm 51. We will recite what is perhaps *the* classic piece of literature that captures the faithful person of God throwing herself or himself open to God's mercy.

The Psalmist is convinced of the profound and personal manner in which he or she has offended God and has shattered a relationship that God intended to be warmly intimate.

¹ An idea from a sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor

In casting himself on God's grace, the Psalmist not only acknowledges God's role as the unique savior of faithful people, but also acknowledges the inevitable result of God's intervention: a changed and redirected life.

I believe that there *is* a spiritual corollary to The Law of the Conservation of Energy and Matter. For the purposes of this sermon, I am going to call this corollary The Law of the Conservation of Sin and Sorrow.²

This is not a direct corollary because I really do not believe that there is a constant level of sin and sorrow in the cosmos. Human beings seem to have a unique ability to generate an infinite amount of sin and sorrow.

The downside of being in a closed system where nothing is ever lost is that you can get stuck with some stuff that you do not want to keep. Sin and sorrow are the flotsam and jetsam of our souls and of society.

The love of God found in Jesus Christ is the release valve, so to speak, in this system. God's love can transform sin and sorrow into more productive forms of energy and emotion.

Unless we open ourselves to God's healing mercy, accretions of sin accumulate and the detritus and debris of sorrow pile up, choking the life out of our souls. Only God's intervention can change and redirect sin and sorrow.

Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who kept a diary during World War II once wrote, "Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due, for if everyone bears their grief honestly and courageously, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate.

But if you do not clear decent shelter for your sorrow and instead reserve most of the space inside you for hatred and thoughts of revenge----- from which new sorrow will be born for others ----- then sorrow will never cease in this world and will multiply."³

During Lent we are called to deal honestly and courageously with our sin and sorrow. We are reminded to open our lives to God's transforming love and mercy.

The Lenten disciplines of acts of kindness, prayer and fasting are tools that we can use to clear the clamor and clutter that keeps light of God's love from shining into our lives; they help us pull away the shroud that covers the divine spark within.

Martin L. Smith, a well-known spiritual writer and Episcopal priest, tells a rather – well gross – story. He had been out to eat and on his way home became violently ill from something he had eaten. He swallowed hard and tried to hold it in but he ended up purging his guts into a garbage can the subway platform where he waited for a train.

Almost immediately he felt a great relief and was able to make his way home without difficulty. As he reflected on the experience he was reminded of the similar benefits felt after a certain kind of messy prayer.

Smith writes, "We often say that such and such "makes us sick," using an almost universal metaphor for the spiritual and psychological nausea that afflicts us from stressful and nasty experiences and impulses.

And rather like the futile efforts we sometimes make not to vomit when we have been poisoned by eating something bad, we often try to hold in and swallow down what is distressing us.

In the physical realm our systems act autonomously, and sooner or later the brain triggers the mechanisms that force us to empty our stomachs whether we like it or not.

In the spiritual realm though, nothing is automatic. We have to choose to bring the stuff up that is making us soul-sick."⁴

Prayer can be used as a way of spilling our guts with God. Prayer can be used to purge ourselves of what makes us sick in our own lives, of what churns our stomachs in this confused and struggling world of ours and of what nauseates us in the life of the church. Such prayer can transform our soiled souls into fertile ground for new growth.

Now this type of messy prayer is hard to imagine, especially for us Episcopalians, for we tend to think of prayers as well-worded, refined and polite. But look to the Psalms; Psalms like Psalm 51 are full of the words of ranting poets who shamelessly whined, complained, and protested – voiding their very souls with God.

Holy Scripture sanctions and encourages us to get our negativity and anger and fear out in the presence of a wholly loving and utterly unshockable God.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return. There is great comfort in these words. We are part of God's closed, but utterly liberating system. This is nothing and no one beyond the reach of God's redeeming embrace.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. These are not words of gloom; they are a glorious and redemptive invitation to remember that with God nothing is ever, ever lost.

Amen.

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² Charles Cousar as explicated by Sarah Odderstol

³ As quoted by Marc Ellisan in *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation* found quoted in Sojourner's Verse and Voice 1/31/07.

⁴ Martin L. Smith, "Bearings: Healing the sickness in our souls," *Washington Windows*, February 2007.