

Ash Wednesday – March 5, 2014
Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”
- Psalm 51:11

We begin Lent each year by praying these words in our Ash Wednesday liturgy, with the dusty smudge of ashes still on our foreheads. This verse from Psalm 51 reminds us that God, who makes all things new, can restore battered hearts and distracted spirits; and the ashes remind us of our mortality and God’s call to repentance, i.e. to turn around towards God. Thus we begin Lent with hope as well as honest assessment. Such honest assessment includes this reminder that we are all mortal, made of vulnerable flesh, subject to disease, accident, economic dislocation, old age, and death. We are reminded that we share this vulnerability with every other human being and with all creatures, even with the earth itself, and thus have much in common with every other person and living thing.

Lent begins with the pointed and poignant Biblical exhortation, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” As Rabbi Lawrence Kushner points out, we seem to treasure life most when we keep the certainty—and even imminent possibility—of our mortality before us; for not only will we all die someday, but we could die at any moment. Now he wasn’t making a pitch for life insurance; he’s just telling a truth. All we know is that we are alive right now—and what a great gift life is; and that each of us is of inestimable worth in the eyes of God—yet, beyond that there is simply no guarantee—no promise about anything ten years from now, or ten months, or ten hours, or even ten minutes.ⁱ And so, in Lent we are reminded that we are mortal and vulnerable and, therefore, that we share this life and mortality with every other person and nation—or, to put it in perspective, Anne Lamott reminds us, “only one seven-billionth of all this is about you!”ⁱⁱⁱ

From Afghanistan to Baghdad, Syria and South Sudan, and again in the Ukraine—we continually see ashes result from human fear, ignorance and violence. We can all the more readily understand why covering ourselves in ashes is a sign of grief and mourning, mortality and repentance in many cultures and traditions including our own. And so, we are also called to acknowledge our destructive capacity to turn others and God’s good earth to dust and ashes, and are called to turn again toward God, the “Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver”ⁱⁱⁱ and become ourselves life-givers, co-creators with God, healing what is torn and broken in our lives and city and world. As Anne Lamott put it,

“The ashes remind us of the finality of death. Like the theologian said, death is God’s no to all human presumption. We are sometimes like the characters in *Waiting for Godot*, where the only visible redemption is the eventual appearance in Act Two of four or five new leaves on the pitiful tree. On such a stage, how can we cooperate with grace? How can we open ourselves up to it? How can we

make room for anything new?...And so people also mark themselves with ashes to show that they can trust in the alchemy God can work with those ashes—jogging us awake, moving us toward greater attention and openness and love.”^{iv}

So, Lent is also a time when we address the dusty clutter of our own spiritual lives. The word “Lent” comes from an archaic word “lencten” meaning the lengthening of days, or “spring,” and it certainly invites a kind of spring cleaning. Take a look at your life, and your relationship with God and with others. Chances are you will find some unwanted dusty clutter there. This is the time to throw out old grievances and grudges, old sorrows and regrets, old failures and disappointments, old prejudices and judgments—all those dusty, musty barriers that affect your life with God, others and yourself.

Lent is not only a season of renewal of the earth as the days lighten and lengthen. It is also a season to renew our hearts and spirits—a season of prayer, learning, reflection and action in disciplined ways that help make a cleansed heart and a righted spirit. We begin a season whose purpose is the renewal of our hearts and spirit, and our turning around towards God. We are asked to turn again towards God whose Love breathes life into dust; and whose generosity creates and sustains living beings in all their myriad diversity.

Yet, having said this, what former Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold stated about the observance of Lent also holds true, “To live in today’s world as a faithful person is enough of a discipline. There is no need to take on more.”^v With that in mind, Lent can become a time during which we not only prepare ourselves to celebrate the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus, but also become more open to the death and resurrection that constantly takes place within each and all of us. Lent offers an opportunity to discover that mystery of Christ at work within us and among us.

Life is a continuing process of the death of the old and the familiar, and re-birth into a new hope, a new trust and a new love. So, when we live as faithful people attentively, as we are invited to during Lent, then Easter can truly be a celebration during which the full implications of the Resurrection can reverberate into the deeper places of our being, cleansing our hearts and renewing our spirits. Though ashes begin the Lenten journey, something like Easter promises to be at the end. With the seal of ashes on our foreheads at the beginning of Lent, may we also remember throughout this season that *other seal*—and promise—made at our baptism as the baptized are anointed with holy oil and told, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit...and marked as *Christ’s own forever*.”^{vi} All this is captured in Langston Hughes’ powerful poem, “Dream Dust,” which testifies to God’s creative and restorative purposes—God’s grace freely given:

“Gather out of star-dust
Earth-dust,
Cloud-dust,
Storm-dust,
And splinters of hail,
One handful of dream-dust

Not for sale.”^{vii}

I hope that in our life together today and going forward, we may remember these seals and promises, thus restoring our hearts and renewing our spirits as we seek to be faithful in our lives and in our world.

ⁱ Lawrence Kushner, The Book of Words (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1995), pp. 111-112

ⁱⁱ Anne Lamott, Grace (Eventually) (New York: Riverhead Books/Penguin Group (USA), 2007), p. 31

ⁱⁱⁱ From A New Zealand Prayer Book (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 181.

^{iv} Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), p. 92.

^v Frank Griswold, “One day at a time” (New York: Episcopal Church, March 1, 2006).

^{vi} Book of Common Prayer, p. 308.

^{vii} Langston Hughes, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), p. 75.