

Ash Wednesday
March 1, 2006
St. Paul's, Fairfield
Rev. Mary Anne Osborn
"Remember & Return"

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

This is the resounding call of Lent today. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

When I was a brand new priest and serving and as hospital chaplain, Ash Wednesday was a big day. It came as quite a surprise to me that people all over the hospital wanted to get ashes on their foreheads. The nurses and aides, the maintenance and dietary workers, the administrators, and the patients and their families would line up in the halls just to get ashes on their foreheads.

As a new priest on my very first Ash Wednesday in an environment where death was a constant presence and nobody needed to be reminded of their mortality, it was really hard for me to say these words. I decided that I would change them into something more life affirming, not quite so "depressing". Why would a person in end stage AIDS want to hear, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return?"

So I said something like, "Remember that you are God's beloved one." Not quite the same, is it?

Now, many years later, I look forward to hearing these words today. I need to hear them. My heart soaks them in. We all need to hear these words, and not just to be reminded of our mortality.

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." These words call us back to our beginnings, to our origin in God our Creator who took the dust of the earth and breathed life into us. These words come from a primordial voice deep within us, a voice that often gets drowned out by the business and preoccupations of our lives. We lose our ability to hear when there is so much other noise and so many other voices we follow.

So these ashes today are a reminder of who we are. It's a powerful image that is meant to remind us that without the breath or Spirit of God moving is us, we are just like these ashes: lifeless, worthless.

So is it any wonder that we need to hear these words and that our spirits yearn to remember and return? To me it feels like water on parched earth. To stop and allow the Spirit of God to pour over us and do its transformational work is the gift and the challenge of Lent.

So often we think of Lent as a 40 day self-help program. You know, do all those things that are good for you anyway: eat fewer sweets, drink less caffeine or alcohol, pray more, do something good for other people. Those are all fine, but it kind of puts the focus on us and our own ability to be disciplined. It becomes a matter of how strong *we* are and how resolute we can be in sticking to our discipline.

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." This is the call of Lent and it has nothing to do with how determined and successful we can be in our Lenten discipline. It has everything to do with remembering who we are and drawing closer to our origins in God's heart.

This is the most merciful season of the church year, a time when we are beckoned to return to who we are, created in God's image as God's very own from the dust. We mean everything to God, and God wants us to draw nearer.

In her book *Speaking of Sin*, Barbara Brown Taylor talks about the importance of knowing ourselves and our own particular sins. To do this, she says, look for *the experience that makes part of you die*...the experience that makes part of you die.

Think of it. This can be anything that deadens us to God's voice in our deepest heart. What makes part of us die runs the gamut: addictions to sweets or caffeine or alcohol, yes. Those are the easiest to identify perhaps.

But many other less obvious things can make parts of us die. Things like exhaustion that comes from always running to the next thing or trying to make our lives fit some sort of expectation. Things like pursuing success to such an extent that we push harder and harder and forget what's most important. Even something apparently good for us, like exercise or dieting, can become such an obsession that it takes the place of God's voice deep within calling us to remember.

Last night at Mardi Gras, lots of people wore masks, covering their faces and hiding who they were. Today, the masks are gone. We come before God in our nakedness, not in shame, but in the awareness that God created us just the way we are, and only in Christ can we become our true selves. No more pretending. No more trying to do it on our own.

Today we stand ready to strip away the falsehoods, the masks, the things that obscure our real identity as God's own creation. That is the gift of Lent, if we take it...to find ourselves anew in the heart of God and to be reborn as God's very own, drawing life from God's life in us. Lent isn't a time for reinventing the self by a supreme effort. It is a time for opening up to God and letting the shadows and hidden places within be revealed and released.

Today we offer ourselves anew to God's transforming gift of Jesus Christ, not to be re-made into something we are not, but to be revealed as someone *we are* as created and loved and redeemed by God in Christ. It's not about what we can do for ourselves. It is about living by the Grace of God and God alone.

Lent gives us the opportunity and the tools to be made real again, to come home to God. If we take the risk. No masks. No pretenses. Dust to dust.

We have forty precious days to open ourselves to God, to examine ourselves in the presence of one who created us, knows us, and loves us. We have forty days to face ourselves and learn to not be afraid of our sinfulness. We ARE dust, and to dust we shall return, but with God's grace we can learn to live this life more fully, embracing our sinfulness, allowing God to transform us.

My prayer this lent is that God may grant us:

the wisdom to know ourselves;
the courage to admit our sins;
and the grace to receive God's never-failing mercy and forgiveness.
Amen.