

FROM THE ASHES WE WILL RISE: THE POWER OF ASH WEDNESDAY

Guest Contributor

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By James Richardson

Ash Wednesday 2018 dawned like no other in my lifetime.

A few short months earlier, fires had raged through Sonoma, Napa, and Lake counties north of San Francisco, merging into what became known as the “Wine Country Fires” — and the deadliest wildfire in California history up to that date.

More than 40 people died in the October 2017 fires, and 9,000 structures were destroyed. The fires made no social distinctions, incinerating suburban homes, mansions, trailer parks, shopping centers, an assisted living facility, and historic landmarks.



In my Santa Rosa congregation, the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, a dozen families lost their homes. Months later, on Ash Wednesday, many were still living in motels, or with friends and family. More than a few would not return to the area.

The Episcopal Church Morning Prayer readings for that day included Amos 5:13: "...for it is an evil time..."

And so it felt on that Ash Wednesday. By mid-morning we would be confronted with even more evil and death: a gunman opened fire at a high school in Parkland, Florida, leaving 17 people dead, including 14 teenagers.

With cruel irony, the date was February 14 — Valentine's Day.

I began my Ash Wednesday sermon this way:

This is the one day of the year that the Church sets aside to remind us of the frailty and uncertainty of life, and indeed, to remind us of our mortality. I'm not sure we really need much reminding of that this year.

We have had many more experiences of tragedy, evil, and death since then — more lethal wildfires in Northern California; a global pandemic that has claimed more than 900,000 lives in our country and touched all of our communities; and more shootings, violence, racial conflict, and political turmoil. We might be tempted to go easy with the ashes this year, needing no new reminders of the frailty and uncertainty of life.

Yet there is something cathartic about Ash Wednesday.

I know of clergy this year exploring creative ways to administer ashes with the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Some are preparing “take home” ash kits. Others are planning outdoor worship services with worshipers self-administering the ashes on their own foreheads, and some are planning to sprinkle ashes from a socially safe distance.

The power of Ash Wednesday in 2018 still sticks with me. It wasn't in the words. It was in the ashes. It took strangers to teach me why.

On a Sunday morning while the fires still burned, a Sonoma State University art professor introduced himself to me at the end of our Sunday worship. His name: Gregory Roberts. Professor Roberts asked me if I could connect him with people who had lost their homes in the fires. He was hoping they would provide a handful of ash from the ruins. Each homeowner would eventually receive a unique piece of pottery with their ashes used in the glaze.

From the ugliness and pain of the ashes, something new and beautiful would emerge. Those who had lost so much would hold in their hands something representing not only their loss but life beginning anew.

Professor Roberts asked me to take a few plastic bags with instructions inside on how to collect and return ashes to his studio. I agreed to help, and I took a dozen bags to give to people in the parish who had lost their homes.

That evening, I posted on my Facebook page that I had these bags. I wasn't thinking carefully about this, but I had set my Facebook to “Public,” meaning anyone on Facebook could see my post.

Anyone.

By the next day, my posting had been shared with more than 2,000 people on Facebook, and I was flooded with requests for ash collection kits.

So began hundreds of conversations with people who had lost everything in the fires. Very few had any connection to the church — any church — but it didn't matter. For days, I heard their stories of loss and pain in the ashes.

I also heard stories of hope rising from the ashes. Strangers taught me about the cathartic power of the ashes.

Alison Cole, our parish administrator, and I copied the instructions, bought more plastic bags, and mailed hundreds of ash collection kits to people who had lost their homes.

Many months later, Professor Roberts and his students made these ceramics, and each looked like a beloved local landmark — the Round Barn — that burned in the fires. The ceramics were publicly displayed before being given to the homeowners.

By then, the power of ashes had touched the entire community.

Not long after the fires were extinguished, homemade signs began popping up in store windows in Santa Rosa with the words: "From the



Ashes We Will Rise.” Someone even bought a billboard on Highway 101 with the phrase. On a sidewalk I found a tattered leaflet with the words “From the Ashes We Will Rise” and framed it for my office.

I’ve asked myself many times since those days about why in the ashes — these dirty, sooty reminders of death and disaster — we find the promise of new life? How is it that in the remnants of what is gone we can feel what will be new again? And how is it that we can sense blessings emerging from the dust of death?

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

And remember *from dust* you shall return. From the ashes we will rise.

Ultimately, I believe this sense of blessing and holiness on Ash Wednesday comes not from words but from the ashes themselves.

With the ashes on our foreheads, something deeply, deeply powerful is at work in us that is hard to explain — and maybe doesn’t need explaining.

We can try to persuade people with our words that all of us will experience new life, and we can assure people that the tragedies of this life won't get the last word, and we can proclaim that even at the grave we will sing, *Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia*.

But to know this — truly know this deep in our souls — we need to touch the blessings, and we need to let the blessings to touch us. And that is why we smear ashes on our forehead on Ash Wednesday.

From the ashes we will rise.

The Rev. James Richardson is the retired priest-in-charge of the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation in Santa Rosa, California.