

FROM DUST TO DIAMONDS

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March 6, 2019; Ash Wednesday, Year C

Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“...if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.”

– Isaiah 58:10

“I would rather be ashes than dust! I would rather that my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze than it should be stifled by dry-rot. I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet. The function of man is to live, not to exist. I shall not waste my days trying to prolong them. I shall use my time.”

So wrote novelist Jack London, author of *Call of the Wild*, *White Fang*, and a host of other stories about frontier days in Alaska. London was true to his word. He did live his life as a “superb meteor”: before he was 17 years old, he’d worked in a cannery and also as a sailor, an oyster pirate, and a fish patroller. He also spent some time as a hobo, riding trains. During a national economic crisis, he joined a march of unemployed workers. He was arrested and spent a month in jail for vagrancy.

London didn’t much care for jail, so when he got out, he got himself a high-school equivalency diploma and enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley. He immersed himself in books, and became a radical socialist. A year later, in 1897, he dropped out of college to join the Alaska gold rush. London

never did strike it rich, but he did discover enough material to become a successful writer. He published his first book at age 24, and over the next 17 years, he wrote a total of 50 books. He also became an alcoholic. At the age of 40, he drank himself to death.

Jack London's life is a classic example of burnout. He went up like a skyrocket, and came down like a fluttering cascade of gray ash. "I would rather be ashes than dust!" Yes, he was true to his word.

In the end, though, Jack London didn't get his way. He may have burned himself out through hard living, but in the end he became dust – just as surely as anyone else. For such is the fate of every human being.

The ancients used to consider it a virtue to ponder this sort of thing. The author of Psalm 90 engages in just such a philosophical rumination:

**For all our days pass away under your wrath;
our years come to an end like a sigh.
The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.** *[Psalm 90:9-10]*

The psalmist concludes by praying, "Teach us to count our days, that we may gain a wise heart."

And so it came to pass, many centuries ago, that ancient people would remind themselves of their mortality by smearing ashes on their bodies. Ashes were a part of daily life, back then. Every home contained a fireplace; it was a

daily task to carry out the cold ashes and dispose of them. If death or sadness entered your household, the way to respond was to blacken your face with fireplace ashes and weep.

Ashes became a sign not only of sadness, but also of repentance. When Job wearies of his philosophical debate with God — concluding that the only solution to the problem of suffering is to let God be God — he brings his rebellion to an end by declaring, “I repent, in dust and ashes.” The ashes are a symbol of profound sorrow: not only because of human mortality, but because of human sinfulness.

And so, as we gather this evening, to reflect on the symbolism of the ashes, we participate in a tradition older than history. What we do, in receiving ashes on the forehead, is unspeakably ancient. It’s a frank acknowledgment of who we are, as human beings — and as sinners.

But that’s not where the story ends (if it were, we may as well follow the example of Jack London, burning out before we rust out). God’s ultimate intention for our souls is not that we end in ashes.

Isaiah the prophet asks if that’s what God truly desires for us: that we end up repenting in the ashes. The prophet speaks a word from the Lord, who says,

**“Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?”** *[Isaiah 58:5]*

No, says the Lord, this is not the fast that I choose. The fast of the Lord's choosing is:

**“...to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke...
...to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house...”** *[58:6-7]*

What we are, as human beings, may not always live up to God's expectations. All of us have done things — or failed to do things — for which we can only repent. Yet God's deepest desire for us is not that we should remain in the ashes, but rather that we should get up and live in a new way. That's what repentance really means, you know. It's not just feeling sorry for ourselves; it's turning our lives around and living differently.

There's an old story about a man from the city who was out driving one day, in the country. The signs on the road weren't very good, and he got lost. So he stopped at a farmhouse to ask directions. “Can you tell me how far it is to the town of Mill Pond?” he asked.

“Well,” said the old farmer, “the way you're goin' it's close to 25,000 miles. But if you turn around, it's about four.”

That's the way it is when what we're all about is only guilt, not repentance. There's no end to guilt. Really, there isn't. It's possible to so wallow in guilt that

we never get away from it. After a while, feeling guilty become almost pleasurable, in a perverse sort of way.

No, what God wants for us is a clean break with the past: that we acknowledge our guilt, then move on: move on to repentance, to truly doing the Lord's work.

Let me give you an extreme example — though this is a story that is, sadly, all too common. A husband beats his wife badly enough to put her into the hospital. It's not the first time he's done that. The next day, he feels guilty. He brings her flowers. He says he's sorry. He promises never to do it again.

Yet what's going to happen the next time he's frustrated, or angry, or has simply had a few drinks too many? If he's done nothing more than feel guilty — if he hasn't faced up to his sin, if he hasn't taken positive steps to change his behavior, if he hasn't called upon God to help him change the deadly behavior, and followed up with some kind of treatment program — then his repentance is no repentance at all.

The point of the ashes on the forehead is not merely guilt: it's also a desire to change. Such is the truth Isaiah declares. He has this to say about the one who fasts in the truest way — who performs acts of justice for the needy...

**“Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.**

**Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.”**

[58:8-9]

God’s greatest desire for us is that the ashes on the forehead will be a symbol not of despair, but of hope. Did you know that one of the most beautiful and cherished items in all the world — a diamond — is nothing more than carbon dust (ashes, in other words) that’s been exposed to pressure? I remember learning this fun fact, as a kid, while watching the old black-and-white *Superman* TV series, the one starring George Reeves. There’s a scene, in one of those episodes, in which Superman takes a lump of coal in his hand, and squeezes it, very hard. He grunts. He grimaces. Smoke comes out of his clenched fist. When he opens his hand, the lump of coal is there no longer. A glittering diamond has taken its place.

In God’s hand, the ashes of a human life are more than mere refuse, to be carted away. By the amazing power we call grace, you and I can be transformed from our natural state of sin into something strong and beautiful.

And how do we know this is true? Because of another journey from dust to diamonds, a journey taken two thousand years ago, by a man named Jesus. He went to a cross and died. They laid him in a borrowed tomb. Three days later, he stood upon his feet and lived again.

This same Jesus lives still. He lives forever and ever.

Dust to diamonds! Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

Holy God, we praise you for your unending, invincible love for us. You have called us out of the dust. You have called us by name, and claimed us as your own. You bring us through tumultuous waters, through raging rivers, and across the burning coals of the fires that sometimes burn in our lives. You strengthen us, Lord, to live our lives as testaments to your glory. You are our salvation, our ever-present help in time of trouble. We praise your name, and we ask for continued strength for the living of these days. Amen.

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