Ash Wednesday: A poem

by Garrett Mostowski (March 2, 2022)

God knows I don't need to be reminded I'm nothing,
but it is nice to know
someone once promised—
at the beginning of recorded time—
we would all be dust again some day.
—
I've never wanted to die, but
there is something comforting
about all this talk of our capacity to pass away and disintegrate,
sink back into the universal fabrics blanketing us with grace,
where, I'm assuming, we will all just sort of fall asleep
until someone decides it's time
to wake us up again.
—
I wish the person imposing upon me
the mark of eternal fate,
I wish they would write in parentheses
just above the cross
looking askance
on my forehead,
"Don't worry. Everything's worked itself out already."
—
You may pray for me now
and at the hour of my death,
but I already know bones
can live. So, save your breath.
—
If you live,
then you live.
If you die,
then you're dead.
So, whether you die or whether you live,
remember: God still gave you this breath.



Garrett Mostowski is co-pastor of Fort Street Presbyterian Church,Detroit MI. His work has been published in Christian Century, Geez Magazine, and the Princeton Theological Review, among others. In his free time, he hosts and produces Textual Intercourse, a weekly podcast exploring scripture, meaning, and truth.

“Jesus got angry, but he never disengaged.”
Teri Macdowell Ott, Presbyterian OUTLOOK

You are dust, and to dust you will return … but not forever

Aaron Neff (March 2, 2022)

I never observed Lent when I was growing up. I wasn't really even aware of Lent growing up. Being from Pennsylvania, the closest Lent ever got to my life was on “Fastnacht Day,” which is a Pennsylvania Dutch tradition of using up all the butter or lard in your house in preparation of Lenten fasting. I never really understood the Lenten fasting part; I just knew that, once a year, special doughnuts appeared in grocery stores. I honestly don't know why Lent was off my radar. I was raised in the United Methodist Church, which does observe the liturgical calendar including Lent, but, for some reason, my particular congregation never observed it. I think that may be part of the reason why Lent is such a special time of the liturgical year for me now. When I finally discovered Lent, it felt like I had found a missing part of my faith that I never knew I needed.

Although I was raised in the Methodist tradition, I briefly became a Pentecostal in my late teens and early twenties. I will never forget the first time I observed Ash Wednesday. I was twenty-two years old and in my final year of college. Three friends and I (just a bunch of low-church Pentecostal kids who were hungry for some liturgy) attended an evening service at Washington Memorial Chapel in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. The Chapel is an active Episcopal church housed in a historic building constructed in a beautiful Gothic style. At that point in my life, I was used to worship styles that had no apparent liturgical structure. The whole experience of receiving ashes, taking communion, and being reminded to observe a holy Lent felt deeply meaningful. I remember specifically how struck I was by the refrain, “You are dust, and to dust you will return.” The feeling of that moment still lingers with me today.

What is a human being? Humans are made up of various organ systems which, if we were to look at more closely, are made up of various cells which are made up of various chemical compounds, primarily oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, and nitrogen. As it turns out, these elements are exactly what you can find in a common soil sample. “You are dust, and to dust you will return.” That refrain really takes on a new meaning if you think about it that way.

Are humans really just dirt organized in a different, more complex way? What separates us from the dirt? I'm sure there is a scientific answer to that question, but, speaking theologically, the answer is the very breath of God (Genesis 2:7). You and I are animated and alive, because the very being of God flows through us. After I converted to Presbyterianism and eventually became a Presbyterian pastor and worship leader, this reality is what I have come to love so

dearly about Lent. Apart from God, we are just dirt, which is a reason to give thanks that God remains with us wherever we are. In life, God gives us meaning and purpose. Even in death, while a part of us remains and changes into dirt, another part of us continues to live on in connection to the very source of breath that has animated us from the very beginning.

You are dust, and to dust you will return … but not forever. We contemplate the reality of life and death during Lent and look forward to the hope of Easter, when, in our own future resurrections from the dead, the part of us that goes down to the dust will be made new again. As Ash Wednesday approaches this year and you hear that familiar refrain again, will you join me in observing a holy Lent and giving thanks that God's life flows through us?



Aaron Neff is head, First Presbyterian Church, Pittsford, New York.

Growing to love Ash Wednesday

by Julie Raffety (March 22, 2022)



Photo by Annika Gordon

I grew up a Presbyterian, but not the kind who celebrated Ash Wednesday. I remember seeing my Catholic friends at school on Ash Wednesday with huge smudges on their heads. It felt like a clear reminder of a dividing line between Protestants and Catholics. It made me wonder always wonder why Presbyterians did not celebrate Ash Wednesday. That sense of wonder stayed with me until I served my first church in Rockford, Illinois – a Presbyterian church that celebrated Ash Wednesday – and I learned firsthand the liturgical significance of this tradition.

Ash Wednesday marks the first day of Lent, and, now that I know more about it, I am surprised that not all Presbyterian churches embrace it. In my experience, Presbyterians like to be orderly, and what is more orderly than bookends for church seasons? But, in all seriousness, I can see why it took some churches awhile (and some still have not) to bring Ash Wednesday back after the Protestant Reformation. It is, most certainly, a holy day of ritual that is closely observed by our beloved Catholic siblings. One of the pieces of the Presbyterian denomination

that I most appreciate is that there is much freedom in worship and study and service. There are many ways, not one way of doing things. My first call taught me that Ash Wednesday, though traditional, can also be celebrated in new and different ways.

At my church in Rockford, there was one lay pastor whose favorite church holy day was Ash Wednesday. In my initial opinion, this was unique, if not odd, for a Presbyterian. But, watching her prepare for the service, one could tell that she had learned to embrace the symbols — the purple adorning the church, the ashes on the table, the dust, markings and crosses. Ash Wednesday service at this church was also a beautiful mess as it was the same night as Kids Club. So all the kids would fill the sanctuary alongside the Ash Wednesday service attendees. I think this pastor especially loved explaining the meaning of Ash Wednesday to multiple generations.

The ashes of death, on the way to resurrected life, remind us that if we are not willing to die to our old selves, we cannot be raised to life with Christ. The ritual of abstaining from something during Lent goes along with this as well as accompanying Christ in sacrifice. In my church in Illinois, there were so many children who came up to receive ashes, so we had two sayings as we marked foreheads. For the adults, we said the familiar “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). To the children, we said, “Marked and sealed with the sign of Christ” as we placed a cross on their forehead or hand. Whatever the phrase, the ashes remind us that we are temporary; Christ is eternal.

Living during a pandemic has further shown me how the tradition of Ash Wednesday can be celebrated in different ways. Like last year, we will place the ashes on the table with hand sanitizer and invite worshipers to mark themselves this year as I recite the Scripture. While also a helpful pandemic hack, this practice makes the worshiper even more of a participant. As Christ willingly chose the cross, we will willingly join Christ on this journey, beginning with marking ourselves with ashes. I am planning some Ash Wednesday stations of reflection and ritual to go along with our ashes this year.

I still consider myself new to Ash Wednesday, but I am growing to love it like that lay pastor back at my old church. I am growing to love the hands-on, participatory nature of this ritual worship. I am growing to love entering into this Lent season with Christ with action and purpose. And, like a true Presbyterian, I am loving worshiping on an “old” holy day with our “new” churches right where we are. I am now a Presbyterian who celebrates Ash Wednesday, and I truly can’t imagine beginning Lent without it.



Julie Raffety serves as the pastor at First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, New Jersey. She is a violinist, snowboarder, runner, identical twin and crazy about popcorn.