

Ash Wednesday  
February 17, 2021

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dust from the earth. Ash of the ground.  
Holding those tiny particles of dirt in your loving hands.  
Gently you breathed the spirit of life.  
Dry and dusty soil slowly took a new shape.  
An arm, a leg, a heart beating gently.  
Eyes that could see, ears that could hear.  
A glorious mind able to experience the love,  
Through which you took delight in creating humanity.  
What once was dead. Now alive.  
Created by you, the source of all life.<sup>i</sup>

Those are words that flowed onto paper in the dark hours of a new day that had just dawned. As I reflected upon another Ash Wednesday, our entry into the season of Lent. One like none other that has preceded it. This year, there will be no ashes traced upon our foreheads. Yet, we do not need them. We know they are there. We know the words from Ecclesiastes that speak, "All are from the dust, and all turn to dust again." (Ecclesiastes 3:20) The same words spoken at the burial of a beloved work of art shaped by your hands and your breath, "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Ash Wednesday tends to be a solemn, at times somber, reminder of that fact. In this earthly flesh created so lovingly, beautifully, amazingly by the almighty designer we will die and return to the ground, our bodies once again to become dust and ash. This night compels us to ponder the ways in which we turn from the source of life and seek life elsewhere. This season moves us to repent, turn from those ways, and turn into the forgiving arms of God who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." (Exodus 34:6) Turn toward the hands of the One whom the first book of Samuel reminds us, "Raises up the poor from the dust...the needy from the ash heap." (1 Samuel 2:8)

The One the psalmist recollects, “Knows how we were made...remembers that we are dust.” (Psalm 103:8) The great Potter, of whom Job spoke, “fashioned me (us) like clay.” (Job 10:9) Return to the God of abundant mercy who knows our transgressions; yet, out of divine mercy and love creates in us clean hearts, a new and right spirit.

This year our solemn reminder may not be found in the ashes normally placed upon our foreheads. Rather, our solemn reminder is 5,263<sup>ii</sup>; 485,070<sup>iii</sup>; 2,409,011<sup>iv</sup>. Lives, respectively, of our fellow Iowans, Americans and neighbors around the globe lost to a microscopic particle finer than any speck of dust. They are our loved ones. They are young, old, and in between. They are male, female, and transgender. They are black, white, and brown. They are our friends, and they are our foes. Each one created from dust. Each one returned to the dust of the earth. Let us take a moment to remember, give thanks and cherish each beloved life gone too soon in a moment of stillness. (Pause)

Let us also remember those that have died for reasons other than the virus, which currently besieges humanity. Remember the beautiful vessels of clay they were, shaped by your hands, loved into life, and now rest once again in the land you brought forth at the dawn of creation. Grandmas and grandpas. Mothers and fathers. Aunts and uncles. Children whose bawling cries sang out loud and children whose cries were silent but whom we know you heard and held in your loving arms. Let us dwell in the silence of this wintry evening. (Pause)

In the stillness, we listen and know that you are God. (Psalm 46:1). We know in 40 days we will stand silent at the foot of the cross and be moved by the great love your Son revealed for all of humanity. On Easter Sunday, we will stand silent at the empty tomb and know the dust of the ground that once held the dead body of our Lord has given way to the eternal breath of life that resurrects and creates yet anew.

Tonight, we do remember. We do acknowledge our brokenness. We do repent of our sinful nature. Yet, we also listen and are turned by your Spirit to hear the words that continue to speak life into us. Promises that assure us dust and ash will rise yet again to be with you in eternity. We mark our heads with the cross traced upon them in the waters of baptism. A sign and seal of whose we are. Beloved. Cherished. Precious. Forgiven. Saved. Redeemed. Forever in the arms of the One who placed that cross upon our brow and said, “You are mine.”

Tonight, let us recollect God took dust and called it good. Let us hear the voice of God that spoke to the prophet Ezekiel, “O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus, says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.” (Ezekiel 37:4-5) Let us proclaim the word of God spoken through the prophet Isaiah, “Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!”

Tonight, O Divine Creator, breathe life into those places of our lives where we are tired, our bones are dry. Renew in us a clean heart, O Lord. Renew in us the vigor to glorify you these 40 days. Renew in us hope for the journey ahead. Awaken us and let us sing for joy! For you are the Lord of Life. We may be earth to earth, dust to dust, ash to ash; but, in you our eternal hope lies in the promise you can do the impossible. You are the glorious sculptor that loves even dust and ash and transforms, shapes, and breathes us into vessels, ambassadors for Christ, filled with his light and love. You raised your Son to life from the dust of the ground and so, too, through his death and glorious resurrection will you do the same for all, who through the gift of faith and power of the Holy Spirit, have come to trust Paul’s words to the Ephesians, “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.” (Ephesians 2:4-5) Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Based on the second chapter of Genesis in the Bible

<sup>ii</sup> <https://coronavirus.iowa.gov/#CurrentStatus>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://covid19.who.int/>

Bible passages taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).