Remember that You are Dust

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Remember that You are Dust...

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Text: Ash Wednesday: C

It has been a very typical day in many ways,
much like the great majority of days in
my life.
Up at 6 a.m. to let out the dog and make
the coffee.
A quiet conversation with my wife
before I head upstairs
to rouse the kids and get a shower.
Then off to work,
dropping the kids at school and day care
on the way.
Office work and phone calls this morning,
a quick hospital visit just after
lunch
and then class this afternoon.
Home again around 4:30, to help make supper.
My son and I play 20 questions while we
clean up the dishes,
and after he runs off, 2/3's of the way
through the job,
my wife tells me about her day before I
then head out for this evening's
worship.
It is a pretty typical day in many ways,
filled with its joys,
its rewards and frustrations.
Perhaps not a great deal different than your own.

But it is my life...

and like an old glove it fits me,
and I am comfortable with it and cherish it,
and generally speaking,
would not have it any other way.

Perhaps that is why the haunting words of Ash Wednesday are always such a shock to me...

why Ash Wednesday always comes as such an interruption...

to many of us.

For into the richness and pleasure,

into the anguish and struggles of our living

are spoken those few words which bring us up short.

For the unalterable announcement of Ash Wednesday

constrain us to stop what we are doing and where we are going,

and to look at ourselves,

our community,

and our world through different eyes.

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

With a smudge of ashes,

and without even a name to identify this dust whereby we are known,

we are signed and sealed...

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

They are strange words, coming from God’s mouth.

But they were God’s words, spoken to Adam after his disobedience in the Garden of Eden.
But probably what makes them so shocking,
is our recognition that they are spoken to us as well.
We too, have walked the path of that first Adam,
a path of disobedience leading us back to the dust,
to destruction and death.
And we do not have to look very far or even very acutely,
to know that this is true;
to see that even our greatest and most noble human efforts,
started with the most admirable of intentions,
are somehow twisted,
ever quite bearing the fruits for which we hoped.
The unleashing of the atom which offered the gift of seemingly unlimited energy supplies,
has also brought the ashes of Nagasaki and Hiroshima,
the growing dilemma of radioactive waste,
and the continuing threat of nuclear holocaust.
The collapse of the Iron Curtain and the fall of communism,
rather than bringing the anticipated freedom and prosperity to Eastern Europe,
has brought floundering economies, food shortages,
and the violence and civil strife associated with growing nationalism.
The continuing advances in medical science, while offering the hope of diagnosis and cure
to once hopeless diseases,
have also presented us with skyrocketing
health care costs,
and moral dilemmas which we are ill
equipped to resolve.
Even in our personal lives... we know this
to be true.
How often is it the very people whom
we most love and treasure,
who bear the brunt of our anger, our
hurt and our frustrations?
In all of this, and in the countless other
symptoms,
woven into the very fabric of life,
we feel the aching constraints,
the fundamental flaw
of our sinful humanity.
And we know that, try as we might...
there is nothing...
nothing...
that we can do to change that
fact.
In that awareness
we know that we, too, will die;
and that our lives,
and all that we cherish,
will come to an end;
that all of this richness and wonder
and pleasure,
no less than this pain and suffering
and outrage
which we call our lives
and our world,
will be dust.
Dust... that is the word that the Bible uses
to refer to the things of this world.
Dust, not earth or rock,
the solid stuff from which the
skyscrapers of cities are built
and from which the great mountain ranges
are formed...

but dust,
the dry,
weightless,
bothersome stuff
which we scatter with the sweep of a dust
cloth...
the annoying speck to get in your
eye,
or irritate your throat.
It is a raw and discomforting fact,
one which on a day to day basis
we push from our minds.
And yet, the very purpose of Lent is to
recall us from the diversions of our
daily routines...
not to be morbid,
but to consider our lives in this light.
“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you
shall return.”
This insistent reminder of the ultimate
insignificance of the things of this
world might
mean that we should live as wildly as we dare,
for it will soon all be gone.
Or it might simply terrify and frighten the
living day lights out of us—
except for one thing:
When those words are said,
“Remember that you are dust, and to dust
you shall return”,
in those churches where it is the custom
for the pastor to mark the foreheads
of penitents with ashes,
as a token of what they will soon be,
the mark is made in the form of a
cross.
It is that cross, signed with ashes,
which points us to the meaning and the
hope,
not just for this lenten season,  
but for the whole of life.

It was, with that same cross upon our brow,  
that we were signed and named and claimed  
in baptism,  
as God's own.

And it is that same cross,  
a silent proclamation of God's love,  
which recalls us from that which  
will disappear,  
to that which will abide and last...  
forever.

Do you recall the words of the Prophet Joel,  
which we heard this evening,  
and which we use as the Verse  
sung prior to the Gospel,  
throughout this lenten season?  
"Return to the Lord your God, for God is  
gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in  
steadfast love."

Or do you remember the words of St. Paul who,  
in writing to the church in Corinth  
announced,  
"Now is the acceptable time;  
now is the day of salvation!"

This day, this season, invites us once again,  
to return to where we belong,  
to set our hearts on that treasure  
which will not fade,  
to be a community of people,  
who have allowed God's grace to  
prevail in our lives.

And as we do that, we may discover a  
surprising thing...  
the repentance and conversion of heart,  
to which we are called,  
during this lenten season,  
are not nearly as frightening as we  
had imagined.
For rather than leading us to discouragement,
or to an oppressive concern with our
own failures,
they, instead, serve as a pathway
returning us a life-giving hope.
For only when the debris
and dust
and ashes
that prevent new life
are cleared away,
may we truly grow and live as the
redeemed people of God.
Only when we abandon our own stubborn wanderings,
might we be given the very treasure
which we sought all along.
Yes... we are made of dust...
but perhaps there is a certain grace
in that.
For, finally,
the final word does not rest with us,
either in our failures
or in our faithfulness.
but in a gracious and loving God who
calls us,
yet again,
to return.