

The Rev. Jason Churchill
Wednesday, March 1, 2017

Ash Wednesday

You are dust – and to dust you shall return.

I am dust – and to dust I most definitely will return.

But first, first we must live. And literally live like there is no tomorrow, because none of us can ever truly know if there will be one.

In his Ash Wednesday poem, TS Eliot talks about this as a time of tension, a time of tension between dying and birth – and we MUST live in this tenuous time between both.

In regards to Ash Wednesday and the smudging of ash on our foreheads we can trace the history back at least one thousand years – it dates back before many other traditions and customs that we are familiar with. In fact, it goes back to Biblical times – where ashes were a sign of mourning, repentance, and even reminders of the origins of life itself.

It harkens back to an echo of the very beginning of time, when the universe was unruly and whirling around in chaos – before the voice of God called things into being – there was the dust of the cosmos being strewn about. The dust of the far-off planets and stars, the dust of moons and comets all crashing around a swirling in incomprehensible chaos.

Then the voice of God called all to order – and as the dust settled – settled everywhere, even on our earth – God called it good.

Then, kneeling on the newly created planet God got God's hands dirty in the same dust in which we descend from, God is creating something, God is making something new – God is forming us.

But then, then something amazing happened – once again God bends down and breaths the breath of life into that dust!

That dust, the dust of the cosmos that formed us...it lives, it lives as us and before we return to the dust from whence we came We. Must. Live.

And we must live with the knowledge that we are the product of cosmic events – events that have taken place hundreds of billions of light years away, rendering us with dust from the cosmos, from the earth and most importantly – this dust is a common element we share with all of creation. We are all related in the eyes of God for we have been formed from the same element and we will return to the same place – together – Jew and Christian, Muslim and Hindu, Buddhist and non-believer...all will return together to the dust and to God the creator of all things.

But we must first live.

Together.

Ash Wednesday is a time of repentance and turning back to God in prayer and study of Scripture. It is a time to look within ourselves and evaluate and find peace within.

But I find it very difficult to have a settling peace this Ash Wednesday.

Just the other day, at the Jewish Community Center, there was a bomb threat. Little children were abruptly taken from their toys and games, bundled up in their coats and holding hands had to march to safety – not knowing that someone somewhere could not see that these tiny innocents were of the same dust as they.

Days before the grave stones in a Jewish cemetery in Philadelphia were overturned and graves desiccated because someone somewhere would rather allow hatred to boil over in their veins and not leave room for the overflowing love and compassion of Christ and the God that created us all.

Dust and ash are reminders, especially for the Lutheran Church, of atrocities that went unchecked in far too many places in Europe that led to the Shoah – to the extermination of over six million Jews.

The dust we wear will forever have the weight of a silent church that watched silently far too more than it stood and resisted.

That church watched as a man narrowly elected in Berlin changed the course of human history in an environment that was, in many cases, less anti-Semitic than our environment.

It begs the question – why are churches sitting so quiet when events are starting to unfold far too close to what has happened in our not so far off history?

The Lutheran church of our time, and in Northern New Castle County has spoken – and it has decided not to just stand in solidarity with our sisters and brothers, but it has also made a proclamation that this will not continue in a state or nation so long as people of faith have breath left in them – because when God bent down to breath the breath of life in the creation from dust we were called to live boldly and to uphold the humanity of all others that are made in that God's very image.

What do we do?

We repent, we ask for forgiveness, then we stand up and act.

One way is by reading the book *Hidden Inheritance* with our Wilmington Lutheran and Jewish friends – perhaps attending the event on the 19th.

One way is not allowing ourselves to be fooled anti-Semitism does not exist and to call it out for what it is. Evil. We cannot deny the very essence of the hatred that leads one to threaten children is also behind the idea that we as a nation can take away rights of others to freely practice their religion – the First Amendment is for all of us...even Muslims.

We cannot allow ourselves to be silent in the face of injustice because as Dr. King has said injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere – we cannot be silent if we are to live. And this is the good news of Ash Wednesday, we are called to live – with the guarantee not only of one day returning to the dust, but a promise of life everlasting in Christ Jesus.

So live as the holy dust you are – know you are forgiven – and be the people of God that will change the very essence of what it means to be holy and forgiven.

Amen