

Ash Wednesday

February 17, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

Ash. Dust.

Dry. Burnt.

These are not the kinds of images that we generally like to apply to our spiritual lives. Or, to any part of our lives, for that matter. Springs of living water. Bread of life. Refiner's fire. These sound a whole lot better.

But nevertheless, every year, on this day that ushers us into the season of Lent – the season leading up to Easter, we hear these familiar and uncomfortable words:

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

If you haven't already, take a moment to find a bit of dust, a bit of ash. Maybe it is soil from your garden – no longer dry and dusty but wet and sticky from the snow melt. Maybe it is a thick layer of dust that has caked on top of the ceiling fan, totally forgotten and neglected in these cold winter months. Perhaps it is ash in the bottom of your fireplace that holds nothing but the memories of a log that once stood firm and strong as a tree. Or the contents of an urn sitting atop the mantel, holding the memories of a life once lived. If it is available for you, and if you feel comfortable doing so, work this dust around in your hands. Feel what it feels like. Is it soft and powdery, or is it rough and gritty? If it's ash from a fireplace, does it still hold some of the warmth from its most recent blazes, or has it cooled off, the radiant heat but a distant memory? If it is soil from your garden, is it wet or is it dry? Does it feel dead and lifeless, or is it full of vitamins and minerals, ready to nourish the fruits of springtime?

Growing up in the desert, dust was – for me – an unpleasant reality of every springtime, when the spring winds would blow against the dry earth and the dust storms would turn the air brown. A brisk walk outside in the dust would invariably yield a mouthful of grit. And ash – ash is what we would dump into the toilet in the outhouse at my great-great-grandfather's farm to mask the stench of our bodily waste.

There is nothing beautiful about ashes, about dust. Ashes point toward what was. What used to be. What is no more. A fire that once provided warmth, and is now burned out. A life that once existed, and is now but a memory. The total breakdown of beauty and uniqueness into its most basic components. Carbon. Organic matter. The dust of the earth.

Where ashes point to what once was – and is no longer, dust points to that which is incomplete, unfinished. The layer of dust behind the TV set or building up in the window blinds or gathering along the baseboards reminds us of chores unfinished. Tasks un-done. Life imperfect. Dirt from the garden points to seeds not yet planted; land lying fallow; spring not yet sprung. The dust points us to what may one day be, but is not yet. The dreams that are not dead, but neither are they realized. Longings that have yet to bring forth life. Hope that is still in need of guidance and direction.

Ashes point us backward into the stories out of which we came. “Remember,” we are told, time and time again. “Remember your God, who delivered you from the land of Egypt.” “Do this in remembrance of me.” Remember who you are. Ashes ground us in our past; in our history; in our story.

Dust points us forward into the hope of resurrection. Into the beauty that God is bringing forth. “I am about to do a new thing,” God speaks through the prophet Isaiah. “Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the desert.”

From ash to dust. From what was to what will be. And in between the ash and the dust – between the remnants of life and the unfinished potential of life – between the already and the not yet – we find ourselves this Lenten season. Maybe more than ever before longing for what used to be and no longer is; keenly aware of how un-finished things are right now; how “put-on-hold” so much of life has become. We have been essentially living one big long Lenten season for the last year. Having given up so much, sitting in the middle of the ashes and the dust and wondering when the resurrection is finally going to come.

But here’s the beauty of it. Ashes, and dust – they are more than just memories and cobwebs. And they do far more than simply mask a stench or get stuck in our teeth on a windy day. We associate ashes with death and dust with filth. But they are also the building blocks for so much of life. Ashes can be used to make soap, or concrete. Ash from burnt wood adds vital nutrients to compost and helps to form the stuff out of which new life emerges. Dust, when combined with water, can form either clay to be molded and formed and shaped, or soil – again, to spring forth life.

It was from the dust of the ground that God breathed the first human being into existence. And he was named Adam. In Hebrew, *adam*, “from the dust.” Dust-man. Coming from dust and returning to dust, but in the meantime breathing the very breath that God breathes.

So as we enter into this Lenten season, we are entering a season of “in-between.” A season between the seasons. A season grounded in what has been and looking ahead toward what will be...and in the meantime we find ourselves waiting, hoping, expecting. We find ourselves as dust, as ash. Maybe a little burnt out. Maybe a bit worse for the wear. Maybe getting a little thick

and grimy and cranky after the year that we have had. Maybe keenly and painfully aware of our own vulnerabilities and temptations and brokenness. Probably all of us more aware this year than most of our mortality. Of just how fleeting life can be.

But as the dust of the earth from which we came; as the ashes in which we sit, may we take the time this Lent to connect deeply with the spirit of God that breathes life into us. And may we find ourselves formed and shaped and molded and crafted into something brand new.