

**Sermon preached in Immanuel Highlands
Episcopal Church, Wilmington, DE**

February 17, 2021 | Ash Wednesday

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**Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17;
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

Today marks the beginning of Lent,
the forty-day journey from Ash Wednesday to
Easter.

This penitential season is solemn and sober,
Characterized by prayer and fasting, by acts of
mercy.

In their wisdom,
the saints of old instituted this season of the
Church
because they knew we needed it.

We need to remember our desperate need for God.

This is the need of every human being:
the rescue from death, the promise of eternal
life;
offered through communion with our
Creator.

“You are dust, and to dust you shall return.”
Every Ash Wednesday,
we hear these words—men, women, and
children—
words that remind us we will one day
die.

James Baldwin writes it powerfully:
“Most of us, no matter what we say,
are walking in the dark, whistling in the dark.

Nobody knows what is going to happen to him
from one moment to the next,
or how one will bear it.
This is irreducible.
And it's true for everybody.”

Customarily, we would have our foreheads marked with ashes.
A reminder that we are creatures of dust.
We are fragile and fallen.

From the moment we are born we begin the process of dying.
To think that one day we will be nothing but ash is pretty grim.

In reality, many of us avoid facing this truth.
We don't want to reflect on it or speak about it.

If we begin to understand we are near to nothing, we easily find ourselves in despair.
Being born to die is not good news.

But, the good news is we are born to live.
We are sealed by the sign of the cross.

This means we are infinitely more than dust.
We are God's beloved children
and nothing, not even death, separates us from God's love.

Our dust is charged with our Creator's life-giving breath.
We are beloved dust.

Speaking of the dust, and for the sake of safety this year,
we are not imposing ashes.
It is strange not to.

And yes, I have seen others doing it all over Social Media.
I suspect there are many clever and creative ways to do this.
We are not.

Not having ashes, though,
is only one reality made real by the pandemic.
I saw a post that said,
“How is it we're two weeks from March
when March was only last month?”

If you're like me, coming to terms with this past year
has been hard and confusing.

This wilderness season offers us time and space to pay attention to the state of our hearts...
to where our mind wanders...
and the direction we're going.

Are we fearful?
Are we spending too much time consuming the latest bad news?
Are we praying?
Are we appreciating whatever human connection we can come by?

Are we taking the opportunity to love our neighbors?

Lent is not a season of guilt.
It is a season of opportunity;
The opportunity to turn around.

To choose to follow God
rather than our own desires.

To choose thoughts that are God's thoughts
and words that are God's words and actions
of love.

To shut out the voices that speak of
prestige, success,
power, privilege and influence,
and to be more attentive to the still, small voice
calling us to choose the narrow road—
the way of love.

Lent is here to help us answer these questions.
Lent is here for us to repent and trust.

And so it begins.
A season to be with the Lord in a special way.

A time to pray, to fast,
to follow Jesus from Jerusalem to his final victory over death.

So, with these words, and with our prayers, I offer this:

Today, before the snow comes,
go outside and pick up a handful of dirt.
Get your hands dirty.

As you do, focus on these the symbol of dust
and the symbol of the cross.

Even as we wash the dirt off our hands,
remember the truth of our mortality:
we are dust and we return to dust,

And, we are beloved, redeemed by the Cross of Christ.

AMEN

