

extraORDINARY Dust

Genesis 2:4b-7; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I still cherish a story from my childhood of my grandmother after she had cataract surgery to improve her cloudy vision. I heard her tell my mother that upon her surgical followup, she asked the surgeon to put the cataracts back in her eyes. “Why?!” both the surgeon and my mother asked her, understandably horrified. “Because,” she said, “there’s dust all over my house and now I can see what a mess it is!”

That’s our usual reaction to dust, right? It’s insignificant and ordinary, more often just a nuisance we only notice before company comes over. And really, it’s everywhere. I’ve been thinking about dust quite a bit this week, and even having done my best to keep my home clean, I keep finding dust. It’s so commonplace that we’d be right to ignore it, but take the time to be mindful of dust and you’ll see it or feel it in an entirely new way.

Our first reading reminds us of our human connection to dust. “Then the Lord God formed [humanity] from the dust of the ground, and breathed into [their] nostrils the breath of life...” We come from dust. We are reminded of this on Ash Wednesday as the words “Remember you are dust, and to the dust you will return” are spoken over us. This unity with the ever-present and often-overlooked dust of our day-to-day life may leave us feeling quite insignificant.

But there’s more to the story of dust and us. Billions of years ago, in the infancy of our galaxy, as God’s limitless creativity was spreading throughout the cosmos, stars exploded. Elements formed. Gravity dragged them all together and this stardust became planets, and things, and dust, and us! Carbon, Hydrogen, Nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus, and sulfur. That’s what we’re made of... and some other stuff, in trace amounts. We’re dust, yes, but we’re stardust. We’re made of the same stuff as the stars above us that shine with the infinite creativity of our extraORDINARY God. We are all extraordinary stardust, and into us God has breathed the breath of life.

THAT is what makes us extraordinary. Not that we are stardust, but that God has breathed life into us. God has breathed extraORDINARY love into us. God continues to breath love, hope, faith, grace, and mercy into our lives, giving us new life day by day. There is extraordinary promise in our connection to the dust around us. Our elemental connection to the stars above us is a fun fact. It’s exciting. It points us back to our unity with all of creation—with one another and all that came before us. But that’s it. We are not extraORDINARY because we’re made of the stuff of stars. We are ordinary stardust that

has received the extraORDINARY breath of life from a God who loves us through life, death, and eternal life again. In this unity, we have a profound connection with the ordinary dust that is all around us, and this dust in turn reminds us of God's extraORDINARY love.

And so, throughout this season of Lent, we are extending an invitation to be mindful of the ordinary things in life. Like dust, bread, the cross, coins, shoes, oil, coats, towels, thorns, and stones, ordinary things have the capacity to point us back to the extraORDINARY love of God. This Lenten focus that is Godward rather than self-serving is exactly what Jesus has in mind as he preaches to us in today's lesson from Matthew. Hearing this gospel we might think we're wrong to receive ashes on this day. Jesus says, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." Jesus cautions against our prayer practices, our giving, and our fasting. Do we just have it all wrong in this season of Lent? By no means! Jesus is cautioning us that all these things will be vain piety if our only hope is to gain *attention* for ourselves. Jesus is calling us to fast and give and pray in such a way that we focus on the things and people that are near to the heart of God.

If you give up chocolate for forty days, and just curse under your breath every time you want chocolate, but you "Can't have it", what good is that to anybody? Or as a friend of mine said a few years back, "Fasting without prayer is just starving yourself." In these moments where we'd like to eat chocolate, or log on to facebook, or do something other than read our devotional or exercise, or whatever discipline we've chosen for this season, if we use that moment to consider the extraORDINARY faithfulness of our God, THEN the fasting is worthwhile and God-centered.

It is not our lacking or longing that makes us more Christ-like on this Lenten journey, rather it is our focus on God's will. Throughout this season, all things should be pointing us back to God's abundant love and heart for justice. In this season, especially here at Muhlenberg, we will call upon the *ordinary* things of life to do just that.

Like my grandmother, I pray that you are given new eyes and new hearts to see and feel the dust of God's promise around you. The Dust we receive on our brow today is a reminder of the extraORDINARY love God breathed into each of us, and each breath we extraORDINARILY beloved people of stardust breathe is a reminder that God is still breathing new life into us. We should by all rights be as insignificant as the dust we wipe away, and yet our God is mindful of us, meeting us with love, grace, and new life day by day.

"Remember that you are dust, and to the dust you will return." These words are the promise to us that God is God and we don't need to be. We cannot breath life into dust,

only God can do that. We are called to simply be ourselves—beloved children of extraORDINARY love, called to share that love with all we me. Remember who you are, Church!

“Remember that you are dust, and to the dust you will return.” We have nothing to fear from these words. It breaks my heart as a pastor to share these words of immanent mortality with people like you who I love so dearly. But death does not get the last word! These words are said as a cross is traced on our heads, a reminder that God in Christ Jesus has already gone to the place of death that it might have no hold over us. Throughout this season we will fix our eyes on the cross of Christ, knowing what extraORDINARY things God accomplished there, that we might live and follow in hope and not fear. Our God is at work, with grace upon grace, that we might have life everlasting.

Beloved you are dust. You are perfectly ordinary dust, and yet you are extraORDINARY dust. You are God breathed star dust. You were made in infinite mercy. You bear the divine image in you because it is the divine that made you. “Remember that you are dust.”

But beloved you are here only for a time. You will one day lose your breath as those we love have before us. You will one day rest from your labors, and live only in the memories of those who remain on their pilgrimage. “To the dust you will return.”

And yet we are bold to receive this extraORDINARY promise. Because through Jesus Christ—through his life, death, and resurrection—we know that we have reason for faith. We have faith in an extraORDINARY God who is faithful to us. We have faith the one who made us from the stardust of the cosmos with extraORDINARY love for all of creation, and who will raise us from the dust again one day!

God loved us into life, God loves us through this life, and God will love us into life everlasting. THIS is the extraORDINARY hope we proclaim. THIS is the hope that hears our prayers from the depths of our despair. THIS is the hope that calls us through the spirit to new life. THIS is the hope that is working justice and mercy, help and healing, joy and love through our hands.

We begin our journey to the cross with the proclamation of our mortality, of our finitude, of our complete inability to save ourselves. In hope, we turn to dust to remind us of the ways that God has already accomplished this salvation.

We are extraORDINARY dust. We trust in extraORDINARY love. And to extraORDINARY love we will return.

Amen.