

Ash Wednesday Reflections

[Texts - Genesis 2:4-7; Matthew 6:1; 16-21]

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On Ash Wednesday, we hear the most blunt and brutal words ever proclaimed within the Church. Unfortunately, these are words that can't be denied, disputed, or ignored. Tonight we say, to each individual here: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." There it is, the harsh and inescapable truth! We are mortal. We were all born, and we will all die! Ashes to ashes, dust to dust! And if *hearing* these words isn't bad enough, tonight they are *literally* rubbed in our faces! That's right! Before this evening is over, you will be a marked man, a marked woman, a marked child! The fate of each one of us will be *signed and sealed* - right *here*, dead-center - for all to see!

I can imagine what some of you are thinking: "Come on, Pastor Buzz-Kill, can't we circle-back to Mardi Gras? Can't you work-up some of that *Good News*, Gospel stuff?" Unfortunately, in the Gospel Reading for Ash Wednesday, Jesus actually takes this whole "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" downer one step further. He reminds us that dust and rust and decay is the final destination - not just for our bodies, but also for all of the physical, earthly treasures that you and I possess. Moths and thieves, time and erosion make every *thing* that we hold dear, susceptible, vulnerable, and terminal.

Now fortunately, we can find the grounding for Good News in our Old Testament reading. This Good News stems from the age-old premise, that thinking, self-aware creatures must come from a Thinking, Self-aware Source. That you and I didn't just arrive by some astronomically improbable fluke. The dust of our beginning - that cosmic clutter from which we came - isn't simply a matter of random chance; it actually holds a significant meaning. Our lives

and our consciousness derive from a Prior and Higher Life and Consciousness. Our primal dust was forged and fashioned from the beginning of Time, by extremely clever, capable and Holy Hands! Our souls - and even our awareness of our own mortality - was breathed into us, by our Divine, Originating Source.

The brilliant Big-Bang, the explosive Power of Creation - the Incandescent Light of Pure, Holy Spirit - is an intricate part of each and every one of us. In other words, even our dust is Divine! Our ashes have been blessed and infused with a Sacred and Everlasting Power. Therefore, what seems to be an ominous threat - "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" - is actually an awesome promise. It is the promise that the Source of Life and Love who was present at Creation and at our creation, also remembers that we are dust; and will faithfully see us through our death and disintegration. It is a reminder that the Holy One is with us from start, to finish, to infinity [and beyond, as that other Buzz, Lightyear, might say]!

And here's one final thing to remember. These ashes that go on our forehead come from a living and significant source - the palm branches that are waved to welcome Jesus Christ into Jerusalem. It is from these living palms that our ashes are produced; and it is from the ashes, that new Life arises, grows and flourishes. The ashes you receive tonight won't be flung at you haphazardly. They will delineate the deliberate form of a Cross - to remind you that you are forever connected to the Christ of Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter morning. May they also remind you, that because Divine Love and Life can overcome the most horrible death, darkness and despair, then reworking and reviving a little bit of dust will be no problem!