

Grace and peace to each of you in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen

**“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”**

These are the words that traditionally mark the beginning of Lent. We hear them as ashes are placed upon our foreheads in the shape of a cross. In addition to reminding us that life is short and that each of us will one day die, these words carry with them the implicit message that how we live our brief lives is important.

On this Ash Wednesday, as we hear these words and receive the ashes, we are invited to begin a 40-day journey of repentance, reconciliation and regeneration. And as we begin this journey, it’s important to remember that Lent is not so much a season **about us**, as it is a season about **God’s love** and what that love can do. One wise theologian has said that when we hear the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return!” we should treat them as a gentle whisper from God which says, **“It’s not about you!”** And, of course, he was right. These words necessarily point us toward God – the God who has given us life, the God who has claimed us in our baptisms, the God who came to us in the person of Jesus, and the God who has promised never to forget us or abandon us...even to the end of the age.

If you were to ask me, I would readily answer that Lent is my favorite season of the church year. For me, Lent is like a 40-day retreat or a 40-day sabbatical or a 40-day hike through the Bighorn Mountains. It’s a sacred journey through time and space in which I am granted the privilege of going deep within myself and allowed the freedom to ask rich, deep, challenging questions – questions about identity, questions about belief and behavior, questions about relationships with friends and family, questions about mortality, questions about creation and existence, questions about God.

Unlike some folks, I don’t think of Lent as depressing or restrictive at all. Just the opposite, in fact. I see Lent as an invigorating season of new growth and a time for dreaming of a better life...all rooted in God’s gracious, merciful and life-giving love.

Throughout Lent, I find myself expectantly praying and joyfully singing with the writer of Psalm 51:

***Create in me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me.***

***Cast me not away from your presence: and take not your Holy Spirit from me.***

***Restore unto me the joy of your salvation: and uphold me with your free Spirit.***

Throughout Lent, I am encouraged to look for new ways in which I might be reconciled to the people I love, to the community and country in which I live, to the ecosystem in which I participate, and, most of all, to Jesus, my teacher, friend and Lord.

Tonight, dear friends, it is my earnest hope that you might also joyfully embrace the coming Lenten journey. As the prophet Joel has suggested, take all the time you need to nestle in the arms of the God who is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” As the apostle Paul has written, be confident that the Holy Spirit can remove any and all obstacles that separate you from God. And as Jesus has proclaimed in Matthew’s gospel, whatever your spiritual practices might be, rejoice in them, knowing that God’s gentle touch and quiet blessing are your reward.

In her poem entitled “A Blessing for Ash Wednesday,” Jan Richardson blesses the ashes that await us with these words:

***So let us be marked***

***not for sorrow.***

***And let us be marked***

***not for shame.***

***Let us be marked***

***not for false humility***

***or for thinking***

***we are less than we are***

***but for claiming***

***what God can do***

***within the dust,***

***within the dirt,***

***within the stuff***

***of which the world is made,***

***and the stars that blaze***

***in our bones,***

***and the galaxies that spiral***

***inside the smudge we bear.***

Indeed, marked with ash and branded by the cross, let us begin our Lenten journey with grace, gratitude and joy. Amen

