

ST. CHRISTOPHER'S CHURCH
COBLESKILL, NEW YORK

February 17, 2010 – ASH WEDNESDAY, YEAR C

The Rev. Nina George Hacker

Sermon: “*Dusty People*”*

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17	(A call to repentance and prayer)
Psalm 103:8-14	(God forgives our sins and heals our infirmities)
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10	(A plea for reconciliation with God)
St. Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21	(Jesus teaches on prayer, fasting, and almsgiving)

On Ash Wednesday, I am reminded of the committal portion of our liturgy for the Burial of the Dead: "We commit [this] body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust" (*Book of Common Prayer* 485). Similar words were spoken for the very first time by God in the Garden of Eden, after Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As punishment for disobeying Him, God introduces the couple to mortality. He decrees: "Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return" (Genesis 3:19 KJV). Dust to dust, ashes to ashes. A stark reminder from whence we arose and to whence we shall return.

Some of you might remember an old joke about a little boy who listened to a sermon on “dust to dust.” After church, the family went to visit a relative. Bored, the little boy wandered about the house looking for something to play with, and out of curiosity peeked under all the beds. As his parents were leaving, the child whispered, “With all the dust bunnies under Aunt Jane’s beds, she must have a lot of people coming and going!”

As human beings, we are—both by nature and by deed—walking, talking, thinking, doing bundles of dust and ashes. Just look at a sample breakdown of our basic body chemistry: Carbon (18%), Hydrogen (10%), Nitrogen (3%), Phosphorus (1.0%), Potassium (0.35%), Sulfur (0.25%), Sodium (0.15%), Magnesium (0.05%), Copper, Zinc, Selenium, Chlorine, Iodine, Manganese, Cobalt, Iron (0.70%), Aluminum, Silicon—even Arsenic.¹ Sounds like plant fertilizer. Yes, gardeners know that ashes can be used to help grow plants, but they’re basically worthless.

And to most of us, dust is *less than* worthless. Judging by the number of cleaning services listed in the Yellow Pages, it’s quite apparent that dust is a hindrance and a liability. We can’t make it pretty by painting it. We can’t make it smell good by spraying perfume on it. Dust is dust, and ashes are ashes. Plainly, we prefer to avoid both.

But from God’s point of view, we are dusty people. To Him, our self-righteousness is like dirty dust rags, our virtue but a spritz of air-freshener temporarily masking thoughts, feelings, and deeds that we prefer to sweep under the bed.

So this evening, why do we bother smearing ashes on our foreheads? Why do we gather on this cold winter night to remember what we are and where we are headed?

We gather to remember who we are because we need this rite, this ritual, to dispel our illusions and encourage us to face the reality of what it means to be human. What illusions does Ash Wednesday tear away? Illusions such as, “I’m in control,” “I can take care of myself,” “I’ll live forever,” or “I don’t need God.” We know they’re not true, but somehow we still live as though they are.²

That's why, tonight it is important to remember not only who we are, but also, who God is. And to remember what God has done for us, in and through Jesus Christ. To remember that where we are headed is not predetermined and unchangeable. For God has done us a great favor. He has given us a way out of "ashes to ashes, dust to dust." It is the way of the Cross. Jesus' sacrificial death for us was God's way of placing infinite value upon that which would otherwise be worthless—us, His dusty people.

Ash Wednesday is the day when we cry out to God, "Here I am. Imperfect, incomplete, weak and broken, sorrowful and mourning. Here I am. Sinner and saint all rolled into one. Here I am. Frightened and needy and uncertain. Here I am. Confessing and repentant, and hesitantly hopeful. Here I am. In the midst of ashes and cold, wasted, wanting. Here I am, Lord. Looking for the warmth of hope, the flames of forgiveness, the incandescence of love, the fire of Your salvation."³

Thomas Carlyle, a great Victorian essayist, once wrote: "Of all acts of man, repentance is the most divine. The greatest of all faults is to be conscious of none."⁴ We find the same thought echoed in 1 John 1:8: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

On this night, God calls on us to repent—and gives us the loving freedom to do so. Repentance is not just saying we are sorry. True repentance brings about, in the words of the Prayer Book (BCP 62), "amendment of life." We turn in a different direction, vowing not to go back. It is a holy thing to repent. Yet somewhere deep down inside us, we fear that God will still reject us, that we will never be good enough.

But hear the promise of Scripture (1 John 2:1-2 NIRV): "... suppose someone does sin. Then we have one who speaks to the Father for us. ... He is Jesus Christ, the Blameless One. He gave his life to pay for our sins [and for] the sins of the whole world."

However, this all-important cycle of repentance, forgiveness, and absolution begins with honest and heartfelt confession. Hear the words of James 5:16, "*Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*" Confession is good for the soul, and healing is even better. Perhaps that is why we so often see Jesus forgiving sins and curing illness at the same time.

Even modern secular medicine now recognizes an affinity between our wounded spirits and our suffering bodies. The Book of James also makes this connection. In 5:13ff, we read: "Are any among you suffering? They should pray. . . . Are any among you sick? They should call the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord."

So this evening, after you have received the ashes as a reminder of your mortality and your dependence upon God, if you also wish to be anointed for healing and prayed for individually, please remain at the altar rail after the other communicants have returned to their seats.

In some ways, Ash Wednesday seems like a dreary occasion. But tonight God invites us know and accept that He is offering us a life other than that which leads to the dust heap and the ash pit. All that God asks of us in return is that we dusty people acknowledge we are sinners, repent of our misdeeds, resolve not to do them again, and trust that in Jesus Christ, He is always with us.

Oh, yes, God does ask just a *little* more of us during Lent. He asks that we make a good effort to practice devotion and personal holiness that both model Christ's love and are empowered by it. He asks us to demonstrate selfless generosity and acts of charity modeled on Jesus' love, instead of being motivated by thoughts of human praise, reward, or gain.

From before time began, God the Father committed Himself to us. And He has given us an eternal sign of that commitment—the Cross of Jesus Christ. Tonight we come to receive that sign on our foreheads. We come to commit ourselves, or to re-commit ourselves, to God and to the way of truth and life that He has shown us through Jesus, His Son.

We come to remember the other words of the graveside committal service, the words that precede “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” They are: “In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ ...” (BCP 485).

These are words we should always remember—for ours is a sure and certain hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 1:3), a hope that is ours because of God’s infinite mercy and love for His people; a hope that is ours because God has acted in and through Jesus to open the way to new life to all who repent and believe the good news that Christ proclaimed. Because of that sure and certain hope, we can step out in faith that Jesus will walk with us on our Lenten journey, the Holy Spirit will guide us, and God’s love will eventually bring out of the ashes of this Wednesday the bright and glorious light of Easter and the holy fire of Pentecost.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory! Amen.

ENDNOTES

* Adapted from a sermon by Nina George Hacker, 13 February 2002.

¹ Anne Marie Helmenstine, “What Are the Elements in the Human Body?” 1977, [About.com](http://chemistry.about.com/cs/howthingswork/f/blbodyelements.htm) <<http://chemistry.about.com/cs/howthingswork/f/blbodyelements.htm>> 17 February 2010.

² David A. Tietz, 2002, < D.Tietz@compuserve.com >. Used with permission.

³ Peter K. Perry, 2002, < pkperry@cableone.net >. Used with permission.

⁴ [WorldofQuotes.com](http://www.worldofquotes.com/topic/repentance/index.html) <<http://www.worldofquotes.com/topic/repentance/index.html>> 17 February 2010.