

February 10, 2016
Ash Wednesday
Matthew 6:1, 16-21

Star Dust **By the Rev. Tom Garrison**

Four to six pounds. 4-6 pounds of ash is all that is left of us when we die and are cremated. As it says in the burial service of the Book of Common Prayer: “Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.”ⁱ

Scientists tell us that approximately 40,000 tons of cosmic dust fall on earth every year from outer space.ⁱⁱ And you were worried about a few dust bunnies in your home?

If you think that is a lot, analysts with the European Herschel Space Observatory recently concluded that an exploding star from a supernova blasted outward the equivalent of 200,000 masses of cosmic dust the size of earth.ⁱⁱⁱ

There are some 59 elements in the human body that are also found on the earth’s crust.^{iv} And scientists like Margaret Meixner say the “earth on which we stand is made almost entirely of material created inside a star.”^v Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, the universe recycles and reuses materials, just as we will be the stuff of earth someday when we die.

The poet Anthony Liccione writes that “We are all dust passing through the air. The difference is,” he says, “that some are flying high in the sky, while others are flying low.”^{vi} Which is it for you?

On this Ash Wednesday, the traditional beginning of the 40 days of Lent, we typically confess our sins and wretchedness. There is a lot of wretchedness in us and in our world, to be sure, but I hope you can see that is not all that we are or can be. Ash Wednesday was a tradition in the early Church. In Rome those who admitted to their sins—penitents they were called—were dressed in sackcloth, sprinkled with ashes, and they were required to reflect on their sins and remain separate from others all the way until Maundy Thursday of Holy Week.

This practice continued until the 8th Century, but one suspects there wasn’t much percentage in admitting your sins, because then you were marked and had to remain apart.

Gradually, we have come to realize what Christ already knew—that we are all sinners. Just as we all have the capacity to do good, we can and do cause harm to others.

We cannot be like the Pharisees and puff our chests out and commit the additional offense of believing, “Well, my sin is not nearly as bad as that other person’s transgression.”

Lent is a time for reflection, for improvement. It's OK if you give something up, but may be you want to take something on. Read a book that you would not ordinarily touch, meditate, give part of a day each week to doing something good in our world by recognizing a need around you and helping out.

I want to come back to that part about dust either flying high or flying low. When we are low, God helps us dust ourselves off and keep on going. When our dust flies high, what happens? When the sun catches it the light, it is precisely because of our dust that we see refracted the beautiful sunrises and sunsets, the glorious hues of orange and red.

So tonight, praying to "our Father who sees in secret," let us confess and clear away the parts of our lives just gathering dust.^{vii} In the ceremony of the ashes, let us be marked as Christ's own. Then, going forth, let us explode outward—like that supernova—with wonderful star dust to help remake our universe into something bright and beautiful.

May it be so.

Amen.

"Everyone has a bit of sun and moon, dark & light, salt & dust as part of them, part of a connected cosmic system. We all have a universe inside of ourselves too. Good and bad. None of us are black or white, never wrong and always right."

- Suzy Kassem

ⁱ The wonderful phrase can be found on page 501 of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, dates back to the 1662 Prayer Book as the words said by a priest as dirt is ceremonially cast on a lowered coffin in the ground. As the Rev. Ken Collins notes, "That exact phrase is not in the Bible, but it is Biblical through and through." Look at Genesis 3:19, and similar references in Job, Ecclesiastes and Sirach in the Apocrypha. Many churches lacking a funeral liturgy turn to the metrical text of the Anglican rite and use these ancient words.

ⁱⁱ National Geographic, February 2, 2015. See also Spacecraft Measurements of the Cosmic Dust Flux, Herbert A. Zook, 2001.

ⁱⁱⁱ Universe Today, July 7, 2011, Nancy Atkinson, the amount of cosmic dust generated from exploding stars range in estimates from between 160,000 and 230,000 Earth masses of fresh dust. While the dust is fresh, the event was not. According to the July 8, 2011 issue of the journal Science, a supernova called SN 1987A, so named because it was seen in 1987, is actually the remnant of a stellar blast that occurred 170,000 light-years away.

^{iv} Dr. Ed Uthman, American Board of Pathology, quoting from Emsley, John, *The Elements*, 3rd ed., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998.

^v "The Earth on which we stand is made almost entirely of material created inside a star," explains Margaret Meixner, the principal investigator of the survey project, of the Space Telescope Science Institute, Baltimore, Md. Universe Today.

^{vi} Anthony Liccione, *Tragic Sense of Life*. The final line of the poem is "but eventually, we all settle on the same ground."

^{vii} Matthew 6:6