

Ash Wednesday
February 26, 2020
Trinity Church, Bend

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Psalm 103:8-14
2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Bill Bryson, in his wonderfully entertaining and educational book *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, offers a brief description of how this whole EVERYTHING began. He begins by trying to describe a singularity – at once too small for us to imagine and too impossible for us to conceive. And then? Well this is a brief excerpt of how Bryson describes it:

... from nothing, our universe begins.

In a single blinding pulse, a moment of glory much too swift and expansive for any form of words, the singularity assumes heavenly dimensions, space beyond conception. In the first lively second (a second that many cosmologists will devote careers to shaving into ever-finer wafers) is produced gravity and the other forces that govern physics. In less than a minute the universe is a million billion miles across and growing fast. There is a lot of heat now, ten billion degrees of it, enough to begin the nuclear reactions that create the lighter elements – principally hydrogen and helium, with a dash (about one atom in a hundred million) of lithium. In three minutes, 98 percent of all the matter there is or will ever be has been produced. We have a universe. It is a place of the most wondrous and gratifying possibility, and beautiful, too. And it was all done in about the time it takes to make a sandwich. ⁱ

The building blocks for everything we can see or imagine were born in those precious moments.

Everything that exists now started there and then; the building blocks have merely been assembled and reassembled countless times down through the millions and millions of years that have elapsed since then. And now, as a result of this constant process of reassembly these building blocks have come together now to make you “you” and me “me” – or, as Bill Bryson puts it, “an arrangement so specialized and particular that it has never been tried before and will only exist this once.”

All of which dovetails nicely and poignantly, I think, with the last verses of the Psalm we read this morning, the Psalm we read every year on Ash Wednesday:

¹³ As tenderly as parents treat their children, *
that’s how tenderly you treat your worshipers.

¹⁴ For you know what we are made of; *
you remember that we’re nothing but dust.

And yet the dust that “we are made of” is the very same dust of God’s glorious creation. Our lives are a gift from the God who remembers the holy dust that we are – and delights in it.

God doesn't need to be reminded where we come from. We're the ones who too-quickly forget ... or too quickly denigrate the inherent wonder and holiness of this dust "we are made of."

Consider the words intoned every year on Ash Wednesday as ashes are imposed upon our foreheads: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." We hear those words as a sobering reminder of our mortality – and so they are.

But they are something more. In the light of the science of cosmology, these words about dust are, if we let them be, a reminder of the glory of creation and a reminder of the God who (in the mythology of Genesis) fashioned the first human being out of the dust of this earth (which was itself, I remind you, fallout from the dust of the creation itself).

The ashes of Ash Wednesday, you see, are not merely about our mortality; they are also about the wonder of creation and how life began for us. The ashes of Ash Wednesday are about God's nearness in the very stuff whereof we are made, God's intimate nearness in all of life, from our very beginnings and all the way through to our final endings.

That's a point to keep in mind, I think, as we consider the words of Jesus in this morning's gospel. Over and over again, Jesus speaks of the God "who is in secret" and the God "who sees in secret." The word "secret" is literally κρυπτῶ: "crypt" – a cellar, an underground chamber; it's that dark place deep inside that none of us can see.

To say that God "sees in secret" is to say precisely that God sees us from the inside out, that God knows us from the elemental building blocks of our existence ... and loves the dust "we are made of" all the same. To observe a holy Lent would be to strive to see ourselves – and one another – as God sees us, and so, to see ourselves with wonder and amazement.

With that hope in mind, let me close with another of those wonderful blessings composed by writer, poet, artist and pastor Jan Richardson, this one called "Blessing the Dust":

All those days
you felt like dust,
like dirt,
as if all you had to do
was turn your face
toward the wind
and be scattered
to the four corners

or swept away
by the smallest breath
as insubstantial—

did you not know
what the Holy One
can do with dust?

This is the day
we freely say
we are scorched.

This is the hour
we are marked
by what has made it
through the burning.

This is the moment
we ask for the blessing
that lives within
the ancient ashes,
that makes its home
inside the soil of
this sacred earth.

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. ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (Broadway Books, New York, 2003), p. 10.

ⁱⁱ Jan Richardson @ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2016/02/08/ash-wednesday-a-blessing-in-the-ashes/>.