

## “FIRST IMPRESSIONS” ASH WEDNESDAY

Dear Preachers:

This is an extra. It is less a focus on the particular readings and more a reflection on the day. If you are preaching or involved in liturgy for Ash Wednesday, here are some possibilities that I find helpful. Walter Brueggman is the source for the following:

He suggests not looking on the "dust formula" in the liturgy as an indictment or a curse, or that the imposition of ashes is related to guilt and sin. He sees the origins of the formula rooted in wisdom sayings. The formula urges us to reflect on human mortality. It affirms four matters:

1. the human person is fundamentally and elementally material in origin and composition, genuinely an "earth-creature" subject to all the realities and limitations of materiality.
2. because the human creature is an "earth creature," it belongs with, to and for the earth and all other creatures that share the same qualities of life.
3. this mass of earth ("dust") is no self-starter. In and of itself, it remains inanimate and lifeless. "Dust from the ground" by itself is no human person.
4. the vitality of the human person depends on God's gift of breath which is freely and graciously given without cause, but which never becomes the property or possession of the human person.

We humans are dependent, vulnerable, we rely each moment on grace; each moment on the precious breath which makes our lives possible. This is our human condition, not chosen by us, not a punishment, not related to sin. This is what it means to be human. We live moment by moment on the generosity of God. The humans in the garden wanted to escape this condition and be like God.. Ash Wednesday calls us to a reminder of a definitive creatureliness which we forget. We need to rethink our true identity, our fundamental creatureliness. We need to honor our boundaries and not try to be like God.

This is also a day to ponder God. Note Psalm 103: 14. "GOD KNOWS OUR FRAME, GOD REMEMBERS THAT WE ARE DUST." God remembers that we have been formed in the beginning from dust. We are told in the formula with the ashes, "Remember that you are dust." We are invited in the gesture of ashes to remember what God remembers in Ps. 103. We and God remember that we are dust. God's remembering evokes in God an act of gracious fidelity. That we are

dust does not cause God to reject us, but to be faithful to us. Human transgressions are noted by God and removed; they are removed as an immediate danger and threat. Human sin is acknowledged and ignored, what counts is God's gracious act of removal. God knows that, as dust, we are going to die, and this evokes in God great love and concern. (Notice in Ps. 103, the verses around the statement that we are dust, are filled with God's massive power.) To acknowledge that we are dust is to make an evangelical affirmation that, as we own our true selves, we are invited to trust the embrace of a faithful and powerful God who knows our need and responds to it. We come to discern our true place before God's mercy.

We must "remember" because we are subject to "massive forgetting." We are prone to amnesia. Our consumer driven society leaves us so satiated (or lusting to be satiated) in the present moment, that we are preoccupied and forget our defining past or our summoning future. We have forgotten our essential creatureliness, our "frame." We imagine that we are more powerful than we really are, that we are required to take whatever we can get, because there is no one to give us what we really need. We imagine that we are fending off death, that we can even do this for ourselves. We think that we have overcome death; we have amnesia of our origins. And we lose track of our vocation, we are called to service, entrusted with the garden, with all the animals, and with all living things.

We also forget that God remembers; that we are a daily creature of God's daily care, endlessly being formed and being continually breathed into. We are endlessly being summoned, guarded and fed. Our lives are continually surrounded by the *Hesed* (loving kindness) of God, who wills for us more good than we can for ourselves.

The presider today speaks an imperative ----"Remember." We are not given an embrace today; but are spoken to with a distanced severity. It is not meant to make us feel better but it is a call to have us redefine our lives. A battle is being waged for my identity, an identity we have neglected or forgotten.

--A world of memory meets the world of consumerism

--A world of creatureliness counters the world of autonomy

--A world of fidelity impinges upon the world of homelessness.

I am driven back to origins, to embrace large intentions for me that override my small self-presentation. The ashes on my forehead carve the gospel on my skin...strength in weakness, exaltation in lowliness.

(Notes taken from "The Journal of Preachers--Lent 1991")

Journal for Preachers

*Published four times a year it focuses on the seasons of Advent, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. The articles are not exegetical or homiletical helps, but rather, are reflections for the preacher on contemporary biblical, theological, liturgical, ethical and pastoral concerns.*

*Journal for Preachers, Box 520, Decatur, Georgia 30031-0520*

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Jude Siciliano, OP

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, OP

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