

Robin Dodge
Holy Faith, Santa Fe
5 March 2025

Ash Wednesday 2025
Joel 2.1-2, 12-17
Psalm 103.8-14
2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10
Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Some people treat Lent like going to the dentist. They know it will be good for them in the long run, but they still dread it. When they have a toothache and are in pain, they know they will feel better when the tooth is pulled or filled so the pain will go away, but they still postpone making an appointment. Even when the appointment is just a cleaning with the dental hygienist, people don't look forward to going because of the temporary discomfort they will feel.

So it is with Lent. People don't want to face their own mortality, but we all know we're going to die. People don't want to prepare for their death by seeking penance and cleansing their souls because it's painful to acknowledge our shortcomings. Nevertheless, the Church, in its wisdom, knows that we need to be intentional about our introspection; hence, the season of Lent.

Just as the pain dissipates after a tooth is pulled or filled, and our teeth feel fresh and tingly after a good cleaning, so Lent does not have to be a downer. It can be an uplifting period of cleansing and grace. Just look at the psalm appointed for this first day of Lent. Psalm 103 is a song of praise that can serve as a hymn of thanksgiving by one who has been helped by God. Psalm 103 begins with an exhortation to give thanks to God, much like the exhortation that we will use as the call to confession during this

season of Lent. The first verse of the psalm, which is not part of the psalm appointed for today, proclaims: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name." The reason for this self-exhortation to bless God's holy name comes from the good news that we hear in the psalm: "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness. He will not always accuse us, nor will he keep his anger for ever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our wickedness. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so is his mercy on those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us. As a father cares for his children, so does the Lord care for those who fear him. For he himself knows whereof we are made; he remembers that we are but dust."

Yes, God knows what we are made of. God remembers that we are dust. For God was there when he made the first human. From Genesis: "In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up - for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground - then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground [or, in another translation, formed a man of dust from the ground], and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being."
(Gen. 2.4b-7)

God knows what we are made of, but do we know what we are made of? This day, this service, is designed so that we know what we are made of - that we remember that we are dust, that we are reminded of our own mortality.

We are given the gift of this holy season of Lent to acknowledge that we are mortal, and for self-examination and repentance; for prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and for reading and meditating on God's holy Word. This is why we have the sign of the cross traced in ash on our forehead, as a mark of our mortal nature and a sign of our mortality and penitence, remembering what Jesus did for us on the cross, remembering that it is through his death that we are given everlasting life.

Can there be a better way to acknowledge our own mortality than to hear the words from the Prayer Book, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return?" I know I am humbled when I say those words as I trace the sign of the cross on a person's forehead, and I often get choked up as I say those words, knowing what the individual is going through, what health issues that person is facing, the fact that he or she may not be here when next Ash Wednesday comes around. But to say these words to yourself, knowing what you are going through, what issues you are facing, I think can be very powerful indeed. We can take these words on board for ourselves what God already knows - that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

And we know what we are made of - yes, we are dust - but through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God shows us what we can be made of, what our true calling is. From God knowing what we're made of, from God remembering we are dust from creation, Psalm 103 continues by acknowledging our mortality: "Our days are like the grass; we flourish like a flower of the field; when the wind goes over it, it is gone, and its place shall know it no more." The psalmist contrasts our finitude, however, with the eternity of God's mercy: "But the merciful goodness of the Lord

endures for ever on those who fear him, and his righteousness on children's children; on those who keep his covenant and remember his commandments and do them."

This fear of the Lord does not mean being afraid of God. It means having the proper relationship with God in terms of awe, worship, and obedience. After all, we're told ours is a God who is "full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness. He will not always accuse us, nor will he keep his anger for ever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our wickedness...His mercy is great upon those who fear him...Far has he removed our sins from us. As a father cares for his children, so does the Lord care for those who fear him."

And how do we work toward fearing God, being in awe of God through worship and obedience, being in right relationship with God, keeping God's covenant, and remembering God's commandments and doing them? By self-examination and repentance; prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and reading and meditating on God's holy Word - the same practices we are urged to follow during this holy season of Lent. The ashes with which the sign of the cross is traced on our forehead are a sign of our mortality and penitence by which, in the words of the prayer over the ashes, we may remember that it is only by God's gracious gift of his Son Jesus Christ that we are given everlasting life. Amen.