

Ash Wednesday YC 2022

What can God do with Dust?

By the Rev. Salying Wong

Yesterday, I received the ashes of Silver Lining, my cat who died a month ago. I'm used to holding cremains in my hands, having filled so many niches in our columbarium. I've gotten used to the heft of them—that is, I've been able to connect the heft with the size of the person, even people I've never met. When I received my mom's ashes, I knew they would be light. She was shorter than me and had atrophied from years of illness and then the rigors of the hospitalization. My mom's ashes were very light. Silver's ashes are but a puff.

But a puff, and we blow away. Death has made a long visit on our planet. It's been nearly two years since we went into shelter-in-place. My last check showed that almost 6 million people have died from COVID worldwide. That's a world of heartache. And as if that weren't enough death, we wage war on each other. That's another kind of heartache. The dust of mayhem circles about the air. What can God do with dust? What can God do with our dusty lives?

I think about this amazing phenomenon of dust in the Sahara carried by the winds that becomes fertilizer in the Amazon. 7000 years ago, the Sahara wasn't desert and its Lake Chad was a superlake, bigger than all the Great Lakes combined. At that time, diatoms, algae-like plankton, flourished in the lake. Today, the area where this great lake used to be is called the Bodélé Depression, which is said to be the dustiest place on earth. This dust is rich in phosphorus from the diatoms that used to thrive there. When winter comes, the wind blows massive plumes of this dust into the sky. The wind then blows this massive plume across the Atlantic to the Amazon. At the Amazon, the water vapor from the rainforest causes this plume to rain down. The much needed phosphorus fertilizes the forest.

It doesn't stop there. The phosphorus is washed away from the forest floor over time by the rains and it makes its way into sea, where it feeds new algal blooms—starting the cycle once again.

What can God do with dust? How much of it is bigger than our understanding? On Ash Wednesday, we are marked by dust. Let us consider this mark as a sign of our trust of what God can do with dust, with our dusty lives, with this dusty world.

So let us bless this time with a blessing by Jan Richardson:

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.

—Jan Richardson

from *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*