

Courtney Ann Godwin:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Courtney Ann Godwin:

Welcome to Morning Prayers in Appleton Chapel. Will you please rise and join me in today's Psalm, number 103 in your black psalter?

Bless the Lord, O my soul, all my being, His holy name.

Congregation:

Bless the Lord, O my soul and do not forget all His bounties.

Courtney Ann Godwin:

He forgives all your sins, heals all your diseases.

Congregation:

He redeems your life from the Pit, surrounds you with steadfast love and mercy.

Courtney Ann Godwin:

The Lord executes righteous acts and judgments for all who are wronged.

Congregation:

He made known His ways to Moses, His deeds to the children of Israel.

Courtney Ann Godwin:

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.

Congregation:

He will not contend forever, or nurse His anger for all time.

Courtney Ann Godwin:

He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor has He requited us according to our iniquities.

Congregation:

For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him.

Courtney Ann Godwin:

As east is far from west, so far has He removed our sins from us.

You may be seated.

Choir:
(singing)

Courtney Ann Godwin:

Our reading this morning comes from the poem, Blessing the Dust, 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 by 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.

In the liturgical calendar, today is Ash Wednesday, marking the beginning of the season of Lent. For the next 40 days leading up to Easter, we go on a journey much like the ancestors of our faith, Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, who each fasted in the wilderness for 40 days.

Lent is not just a temporal season, it is also a practice, and a way of being, through prayer, fasting, and alms giving. Many of you may return to this church today, or to another church, to be told the words from Genesis 3:19. Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. While someone smudges what may or may not be a cross on your forehead with the cremations of last year's palm fronds.

You are dust and to dust you shall return is a reminder that God created us with the earth and from the Earth. It is a reminder of God's power that from something as seemingly inconsequential as dust, God creates the wonders of the universe. It is also a reminder of our mortality, to dust we shall all return.

Lent is a season leading to Jesus' death, reminding us of his mortality. Lent leads to Mary's mourning as she watches the execution of her son. These are a dark 40 days, forcing us to contemplate our death and our sin.

But Lent also leads to Easter, to the miracle of resurrection, and to the hope of new life. Lent offers an opportunity for a new life in our relationship with God. Maybe you plan to build a new prayer practice, refrain from eating meat, or fast from social media, but you also don't have to do anything this season, but rest in the knowledge that God loves you for you. Lent is a season of confession and repentance, but it always culminates in forgiveness, love, and hope.

The elements that make up our atmosphere and our bodies, carbon, oxygen, and nitrogen, to name just a few, are created from dying stars. From death arises new life, us. We are dust and we are stardust. A sign in the Harvard Museum of Natural History proclaims, there is stardust in your veins. We are literally, ultimately, children of the stars. We are children of God and children of the stars. Today, like Elijah, Jesus, and Moses before us, we enter the wilderness once more. Not knowing what we may encounter there, but knowing that we are dust and to dust, we shall return. We are stardust, and to stardust, we shall return.

Today, we enter the wilderness once more, with the face that in the dust, God performs miracles. In the dust, God created us. Will you pray with me?

God, we crave your presence in our lives. Be with us as we travel into the wilderness for these next 40 days, and remind us that even in the darkness, you have created us from the same stuff of the brilliant

stars that brighten even the darkest night. We thank you for this opportunity to grow ever closer to you, knowing that nothing can separate us from your love. So if we receive the ashes today, let us be marked for claiming what you can do within the dust, within the dirt. Help us to see the galaxies that spiral inside the smudges we bear. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Courtney Ann Godwin:

Please rise, in body or spirit for the Lord's Prayer. Together we pray as Jesus taught us.

Congregation:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Courtney Ann Godwin:

Please join in singing our closing hymn, Forty Days And Forty Nights. Number 143 in your hymnal.

Congregation/Choir:

(singing)

Courtney Ann Godwin:

Go in peace knowing that you are dust and to dust you shall return. And remembering all of the miraculous things God can create with the dust. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.