

Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Pastor Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
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“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

These words never fail to unsettle us. They speak of beginnings and endings. They remind us where we come from and where we are going. Most of all, they compel us to consider how short one human life is compared with the span of eternity, and what this means for how we live each precious day.

Remember that you are dust ... It is about origins, how we got here.

The Bible says humankind began when God breathed life into dust. Genesis Chapter 2: *“the Lord God formed the human from the dust of the ground and breathed into the human’s nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being.”* (Gen 2:7)

The beautiful symbolism says we are deeply connected with this earth that God puts us in charge of tending and keeping. But it’s more than just symbolic – it’s literally true that we are “earthy” beings. Our bodies are made up of common elements – oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and the rest. Our bodies come from the earth—which is all the more reason for us to take good care of this place that is our home.

Remember that you are dust... It reminds us we are literally, physically related to our planet.

And scientists would say our kinship goes even further than that. Cosmologists, the ones who study the origin of the universe, would say the dust we’re made of is the same dust that is found in the stars. Wow! That’s a lot to take in.

Diana Butler Bass explains it this way: “According to current scientific theory, there was once a time when the universe did not exist. Then, at a particular moment almost fourteen billion years ago, everything that now exists came into being in the form of infinitely dense, hot matter that rapidly expanded, flaring off tiny bits of matter. As the particles and dust from this “big bang” cooled, they formed clouds of gases that eventually formed into larger bodies which are the stars, galaxies, planets, and moons.” (Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World – A Spiritual Revolution*, pp. 106-7)

Now maybe you knew all this, but I had never given it much thought. It kinda blows my mind.

This big bang theory suggests that everything that exists was created at the same time, eons ago. Throughout time that matter, that dust, has formed and reformed itself into gases, worlds, and living beings... including us. So that even today, all things are connected because they are

made of the same ancient matter. "Quite literally, human beings are made of stardust."
(Elizabeth Johnson quoted in *Grounded*, p. 108)

Isn't that incredible? *Remember that you are dust... star dust.*

Remember that you are made of ancient cosmic elements. Remember -- you are connected not only to earth's soil and seas and air, plants and animals, but to far reaches of the universe you will never see. Remember-- we are all connected with all that has ever been, and all that has ever lived. And most of all, remember -- we are all related in and through the infinite, eternal, all-embracing God, in whom all life begins... and into whom all life is gathered at its end.

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

These words send us out into the far reaches of the cosmos and also bring us firmly back to earth.

Bring us back to times when we have stood beside a grave to hear the final commendation "*ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*" Or helped to toss handfuls of dirt onto a lowered casket. Or watched as a grave was filled in with soil until it was covered over completely.

And it comes home to us, how our earthly bodies do return to the earth, in the end. How short our time of life can be, and how urgent it is that we make our time count for something good, and honor God with these precious lives we are blessed to live.

On Ash Wednesday, we thank God for creating us and all this world. We ask God to re-create us in forgiveness, to cleanse us from sin, to re-center us in the purpose for which God gave us life. To reflect our Creator's infinite love for all.

We begin a season of spiritual awareness and remembering:

Remember that you are God's unique and special creation. You are made to give the world gifts that only you can give, out of the particular talents and experiences God has instilled in you.

Remember that you are beautiful and set apart. And at the same time, remember that you are part of everything. You are connected not only to this earth but to the universe. Connected to serve. Connected to keep and tend and take care, in Christ's name.

Remember that you are loved by God individually, without reserve. And, you are loved by God in unity with all people and all things God loves. Together we are all called to awe and respect, humility and service, to honor this sacred connection and deepen it during this Lenten time.

May God bless us on the way. Amen.