

# 1 Ash Wednesday (17 February) 2010

Pr. Franklin Wilson  
Luther Memorial Church  
Joel 2.1-2, 12-17 ; Psalm 51.1-7  
2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10; St. Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; in you’re your great compassion blot out my offenses.... Indeed, I was born steeped in wickedness, a sinner from my mother’s womb.”

“Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

## **Ash Wednesday February 17, 2010**

“Ash on an old man’s sleeve is all the ash the burnt roses leave. Dust in the air suspended; the place where the story ended.” If the poet is right, and the astrophysicists seem to agree, then all things end where they began: in dust.

It is impossible to remember where we weren’t (or were) before we were born; where we will be (or won’t be) after we are dead; the actual event during which we were conceived, how we were gestated within the body of our mother, how we were passed through her body into this world. It is difficult (maybe impossible) to know what it means to be me and not you, and what it means to be us and not them—not God, and how it is we have come at all to be, and to what purpose or—and here comes the hardest word of all—to *what end* we are coming. *Dust?*

“Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Can it be that our end, our purpose, is to return to dust? It is difficult to remember we are dust. We must be told: we must be re-minded.

Where I live, dust is a nuisance. We find dust on the furniture and under the bed; dust piles up in corners and along picture frames. Even on the floor, dust is a constant reminder *of the earth beneath*. University Avenue: plugged in, earphones, I-Touch in hand, it is difficult to remember that we bipedal consumers of mass culture are animated bits of elements enumerated on countless periodical charts posted in chemistry labs and lecture halls—individuated clumps of carbon, oxygen, hydrogen and what-not organically organized into chemically induced energy exchanges producing electronic signals pulsing through the soupy dust of oxygenated flesh, blood, and bone. Can dust *remember* it is dust?

Can we remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return? If cleanliness is next godliness, what is dustiness next to? My wife could tell you that I hate to dust. I often refuse to dust. It’s a rebellion against her good order; an affirmation of my own willful disorder, my own rebellion against the order of creation, the limitations of time, the terminal weight of gravity, the inevitability of my own impending death. I protest, “I do not have time to dust!” I say, “I have to write a sermon. I have to prepare a class. I have to read a book, translate a text,

make phone calls, visit the sick, *pretend* to visit the sick. I will do *anything* to avoid dusting. I do not want to remember that I am dust and to dust I shall return. Dusting feels like futility—a reminder of my mortality—and therefore, like Ash Wednesday, it is good for me—good for us.

Ubiquitous dust teaches that our own will has no place, no choice in the matter. We do not will to return to dust. We simply must. Whether we dust or do not dust, whether we cooperate or do not cooperate, whether we live well or live poorly, whether we love our neighbors or disdain them, we shall, *we must* return to dust—the stuff of which we are made. And this remembrance is good.

As the ancient stories have it: immortals can and will do almost anything. The Greek myths imagine immortal gods who can and do get away with murder. With mortals it is not so: we are held accountable by dust. Dusty limitation constrains the voracious self. Left to my hungry ways, I would consume all. The consumer self abhors dust; the mortal baptized self must embrace dust as a sign of Christ's mystery: even in death, dust shall live anew.

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. The voice of animated dust proclaims this. The collective memory of animated dust remembers this. Animated dust takes up the cross, suffers, and dies for the sake of mortal dust baptismally bound to Christ's everlasting life. Christ outflanks mortal dust. Christ embraces the suffocating dust of death, inbreathing death and exhaling life. The crucified man of dust out-breathes "God of God and Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made." Divine Light revisions mortal dust in eternal terms: the immortal in-breathes the mortal—that we might be *re-membered* in, with, and under him; that we might be *re-membered, rejoined* to that Life which transcends unspeakable death, the unspeakable memory of unborn nothingness, the unmentionable anticipation of impending annihilation. Christ remembers us to a future in, with, and under him. Through the broken memory of our dusty selves baptized, we have hope of sharing the fullness of Christ's eternal life. He is the memory of our future.

Remember that you are dust. And to dust you shall return, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.