

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who turns our ashes into joy, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.

It seems strange to read the Gospel story about Jesus being the Good Shepherd on Ash Wednesday. Under the old lectionary we used to hear this Gospel text on Good Shepherd Sunday which fell on the fourth Sunday of the Easter Season, not on the first day of Lent. So, when I first saw this was going to be our reading for this evening I began to rethink the meaning of Lent. Where it comes from why we do some of the strangest things like putting ashes on our foreheads. I discovered a book, written by one of my favorite religious authors, Frederick Buechner. It's titled, *Whistling In The Dark*. In the introduction he explains the title. When we're alone in the pitch dark we tend to become not only disoriented, but also a bit frightened. When we whistle in the dark it helps to give us courage and to hold the scary shadows at bay. As Buechner says, "To whistle in the dark isn't to pretend that the dark doesn't sometimes scare the living daylights out of us. Instead, I think, it's to demonstrate, if only to ourselves, that not even the dark can quite overcome our trust in the ultimate triumph of the Living Light." From the very beginning of his Gospel John tells us, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John. 1:4-5 NRSV)

So, tonight we whistle in the dark, we remember that God formed us out of dust and that one day we will all return to that same dust from which we came. Why do we bother with this ancient ritual. The Church has been putting ashes on foreheads since the 9<sup>th</sup> century. That's over 1200 years and a lot of foreheads! I think we bother because it makes us feel a little bit less alone, a little bit less frightened in the darkness of this world. We get our ash in Church on Ash Wednesday because of all those days when we felt like dust, like dirt. For all those times when you felt like your face was turned into the wind and your life was being scattered to the four corners. We get dusty because it reminds us that the smallest breath can wipe us out as if we were insubstantial. It's a reminder that the wages of sin are still death and we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Ash Wednesday reminds us we are mortal and we are nothing but dust in the wind.

Do you know what the Holy One can do with dust? In the Gospel text for today Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" This is the day we declare we are scorched and helpless, but God is almighty! This is the hour when we proudly proclaim we are the ones who have made it through the burning and the testing and the darkness. We are the ones who proclaim Jesus is our Lord and He has overcome the darkness. In this moment we ask for the blessing that comes from and through these ashes -- the same ashes that come from

the dust of the earth. We're not just whistling in the dark for no reason. We're whistling as a call to others who are alone and afraid. We're whistling to give them hope and encouragement. How can we make our whistling in the dark more meaningful and relevant in our own lives?

In many cultures there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth of each year's income to some holy use. For Christians, to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year's days. After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves. Here's a few questions to ponder during this next 40 days. As you spend time between now and Easter, meditating on each of them, think of it as the tithing of your time for God...

- † If you had to bet everything you have on whether there is a God or whether there isn't, which side would get your money and why?
- † When you reflect on your life as if looking at your face in a mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see in it that you most deplore?
- † If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less?
- † Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo?
- † What is the one that makes you happiest to remember?
- † Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for?
- † If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?

These questions are printed out and available on the Communications Table across from the Church Office. Please feel free to take one home and use them for your Lenten Meditations. It can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end.

So, let us be marked this night, not for sorrow and not for shame. Let us be marked not for false humility or for thinking we are less than we truly are. Instead let us be marked for claiming what God can do within the dust, within the dirt, within the stuff the world is made of. Let us be people marked for the hope we share in the one who is the light of the world.

May we be a people who don't just whistle in the dark because we're afraid, but we whistle a tune that echoes the long line of Saints before us who gave us this faith and gave us this tune to pass on to our children and grandchildren. May we whistle the love of God and what God can do with mere dust. We are God's dust after all... Jesus once said God could make children of Abraham from the stones. God has done and will continue to do even better than that. God raises his children up from the dust of the earth to new life in our Savior, Jesus Christ. Yes, dust is dirty. Life is dirty. I for one would rather be God's dust, than Satan's gold. May this dust remind us not only of our mortality, but of all our loving God does with the dirtiest dust of all, you and me. May we walk in God's dust every day, until we are called to live a resurrected life with Him in eternity. Amen.