

In the name of God, Creator, Incarnate, and Renewing Spirit.

We find ourselves again at Ash Wednesday; a year ago, this was one of the last services we had in person in our congregations. After the Covid lockdown began on March 13, we found ourselves in a strange new wilderness, figuring out how to be together when, for the sake of our very love for one another, we had to be apart.

Ash Wednesday is a time in the liturgical year that is strongly centered around the physical life of the church. At Christmas, we can decorate our houses, bring in a tree, make our favorite foods; Christmas can be physically in our homes as much as at church. On Ash Wednesday, it is a little different. There is the pancake supper the day before, of course; but then in church there is the touch of ashes to the forehead, feeling the grit on the bridge of your nose and in your eyebrows, the hand on your forehead as the priest says those profound words: "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

We do not have that physical experience this year; but as with much that we've had to adapt in this time of pandemic, I think there is something to

be valued and cherished in this new way we've been forced to observe this holy day. We have the opportunity to look beyond the physical traditions we've built up around this time, and rediscover the deeper meaning, the reason behind the ritual.

In the rhythm of our year, this is the season set aside for us to slow down and take time to move inward; to look with tenderness and compassion on those parts of ourselves that have fallen short of being remade in the image of Christ. We practice looking at ourselves with the eyes of God, whose gaze is both loving and firmly honest. We can never get back on the right road without looking at how and where we've strayed; we can never repair something broken without examining the break; we cannot begin healing without understanding the nature of our disease. Ash Wednesday and Lent provide for us spiritually the time and space to look at our road map again and correct our course; to give full attention to those parts of our lives individually and collectively that aren't functioning as well as they should; and to take the care to probe those parts of our lives that bruise or harm and to set about mending them. It is a time to immerse ourselves in the grace of God's call to us to repair the breaches that separate us, to loose the bonds that enslave us, and to tend to those spiritual hungers that we've

found convenient to ignore or neglect. Ash Wednesday is much more than having ashes put on our foreheads; it is a sacred call to engage more deeply in the work of our own healing, our own salvation.

St. Benedict said never to be ashamed of beginning again, and Ash Wednesday is a time in our rhythm of life in which we are invited to begin again. Where do we begin? Paul has some suggestions: knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God. Ultimately it is the power of God that strengthens and leads us in the work of *knowledge* of ourselves, *patience* with ourselves, *kindness* toward ourselves, setting apart our *spirit* for God alone to dwell in, *genuine love* for our own frail and beautiful humanity, and *truthful speech* about where we've missed the mark God has set for us. Ultimately, it is the power of God, that strengthens and leads us in the work of *knowing* our neighbor, *patience* in building relationship with them, *kindness* toward those who share our common life, *spiritual* communion with all who gather in God's name, *genuine love* for the frail and beautiful humanity of those most unlike us, and *truthful speech* that looses the bonds of injustice, is bread to the hungry, and clothing to those left exposed to the harshness of our world. Ultimately it is the power of God that reaches out toward us, in a

profound *knowledge* of who we are, with *patience* when we obscure in ourselves the divine image in which we were created, with *kindness* when we acknowledge that we stumble, with a *Holy Spirit* that can accomplish in us more than we could ever ask or imagine, with unfathomable *love*, and with an eternal *truth* that can heal and perfect us.

We have lost none of these things this Ash Wednesday, even if we have temporarily lost some of our traditions. And it is this time of inward looking and outward seeking that is the real reason we observe this day and this season. Let us take full advantage of this opportunity given to us and dive deeply into this renewing, holy season of Lent. Amen.