

**Ash Wednesday**  
Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-17  
2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Heather Prince Doss  
Sea Island Presbyterian Church  
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“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

In years past, these Ash Wednesday words have always carried a haunting tone to me. I have hesitated to speak them, for fear that they might be misinterpreted. I have not always been sure of how to interpret them myself. I suppose they could signal to some that life is meaningless. The author of Ecclesiastes used these words with that sense (3:20). And none of us much likes to think about our eventual return to dust.

For some reason, this year I have had a sense of clarity and peace about those words.

As I think back on why that could be, I think about a couple of conversations I have had with a friend who is not well. We talked awhile about Moses and what it must have been like for the old leader of Israel to reach the edge of the Jordan river – to see the promised land – and yet to know that he would not be the one to lead the Israelites there. For forty years Moses accompanied Israel in their wilderness wanderings, but he would not be the one to see them settle into a new home. “Did Moses feel angry or sad or disappointed?” my friend and I wondered together. Did he resist at all the knowledge that he was not well enough to lead anymore? Did he argue with God about those plans?

The Scripture only tells us that Moses obeyed. It does not tell us what he was thinking or feeling. But as I have thought about Moses and my friend who is not well, I have come, in my own mind, to a sense of peace about Moses’ death on the east bank of the Jordan River. That Moses was not the one to lead God’s people over the Jordan simply means that God’s plan for Israel was bigger and more complete than any one person or leader. Moses was immensely important to God’s plans for God’s people, but the success of God’s plans did not depend on Moses alone.

As someone who hopes to live and minister for many more years, this knowledge is comforting. There have been many days when I have tried to carry too big a burden, when I have desired to be the one to end world hunger or malaria or racism, where I have wished that I could heal a friend’s broken heart. There have been many days when, despite my deepest desires, I have felt powerless to make a difference. In these days, if I can just remember Moses, I can also remember that God’s plans are still bigger and more complete and any one person or leader. I am important to God’s plans in this world, but the success of those plans does not depend on me alone.

What is more, I pray that all who face the end of life might also receive this sense of peace. To look back on your life and see things that are started but not yet complete must be especially discouraging. To wonder whether others will carry forward the things in which you most passionately invested yourself is a haunting question. And yet, to remember Moses is to remember that God's plans are bigger and more complete than any one person or leader. If you have been part of God's plans for the world, you can be confident that those plans will succeed because God promises to finish his work.

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

It is in Genesis that God creates the man from the dust of the ground and breathes life into his nostrils. It is in Genesis, just after the first sin, that God reminds man and woman that they came from the dust and will return to dust. But this reminder is not punishment, nor is it a threat. It is simply the truth: all our striving, on its own, gets us nowhere. Our lives, if lived independent of God are meaningless, for it is God's creating hand and life-giving breath which give our lives meaning. It is God's work in Christ which redeems our broken and sin-filled lives and makes us new again.

Paul writes that if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; everything has become new! Or in other words: anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons!

On Ash Wednesday, we are called to remember our mortality and repent of our sins, but it need not be too somber an occasion. It need not be too somber, first of all, because even on Ash Wednesday we receive ashes in the full knowledge of God's grace in Christ which cleanses us from sin and conquers eternal death. We need to fear our mortality because we know that in Christ we have new and eternal life. We need not cling too tightly to our plans because we experience in Christ that God's plans are bigger and more complete than any one of us.

If you are in the habit of "giving something up" during Lent, I would invite you to give up your desire to do it all, to be in control, to save yourself. Give up your old life this Lent. It may take some dismantling. We have plenty of old ideas and plenty of voices around us telling us that we are in control and can do it all and that we should be in control and do it all. We want to control our finances, which seems reasonable, until our insecurity causes us to store up treasure on earth. We want to age gracefully, which seems reasonable, unless we are more concerned with the shape of our face than the shape of our hearts. We want to control our future, which also seems reasonable, until we have ceased to trust God. We hold on to this control even to the very last breath.

I bet Moses never imagined or understood that the work he had begun in Egypt would eventually extend to a cross in Jerusalem and finally bring freedom to God's people in faraway places like Beaufort, SC. God's plans were so much bigger than Moses, so much bigger than Joshua. And resting in that knowledge, Moses could lay down his burden, his vision, his plans and trust that God, who made him from the dust, still had everything under control.

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During the confirmation unit on prayer, I do a dramatic reading of the Lord's Prayer with the students. Peter is praying, and the Lord keeps interrupting with questions. As Peter prays, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," the Lord asks, "What do you mean by that, Peter?" Peter answers, "Well, I don't know. I guess I wish that you would get control of things down here like you do up there." The Lord responds with another question, "Do I have control of you?"

It is God who is really and eternally in control. It is God who shaped us from the dust and who gives our lives meaning. It is God who holds has revealed in Christ his plans for your life and the whole creation. May the ashes on your forehead be a reminder for you of the work God has already done, may they open your eyes to see how God invites you to participate in his work, and may they remind and reassure you that God's plans will succeed because he done it in Christ himself. May this knowledge free you to live joyfully and thankfully, remembering that you are dust and to dust you shall return.