

## BLESSING THE DUST FOR ASH WEDNESDAY

ALL THOSE DAYS  
YOU FELT LIKE DUST,  
LIKE DIRT,  
AS IF ALL YOU HAD TO DO  
WAS TURN YOUR FACE  
TOWARD THE WIND  
AND BE SCATTERED  
TO THE FOUR CORNERS  
OR SWEEPED AWAY  
BY THE SMALLEST BREATH  
AS INSUBSTANTIAL—  
DO YOU NOT KNOW  
WHAT THE HOLY ONE  
CAN DO WITH DUST?  
THIS IS THE DAY  
WE FREELY SAY  
WE ARE SCORCHED.  
THIS IS THE HOUR  
WE ARE MARKED  
BY WHAT HAS MADE IT  
THROUGH THE BURNING.  
THIS IS THE MOMENT  
WE ASK FOR THE BLESSING  
THAT LIVES WITHIN  
THE ANCIENT ASHES,  
THAT MAKES ITS HOME  
INSIDE THE SOIL OF  
THIS SACRED EARTH.  
SO LET US BE MARKED  
NOT FOR SORROW.  
AND LET US BE MARKED  
NOT FOR SHAME.  
LET US BE MARKED  
NOT FOR FALSE HUMILITY  
OR FOR THINKING  
WE ARE LESS  
THAN WE ARE  
BUT FOR CLAIMING  
WHAT GOD CAN DO  
WITHIN THE DUST,  
WITHIN THE DIRT,  
WITHIN THE STUFF  
OF WHICH THE WORLD  
IS MADE AND THE STARS THAT  
BLAZE IN OUR BONES  
AND THE GALAXIES THAT SPIRAL  
INSIDE THE SMUDGE  
WE BEAR.

—JAN RICHARDSON



ORIGINALLY CALLED DIES CINERUM {DAY OF ASHES}, ASH WEDNESDAY DATES BACK FROM AT LEAST THE 8TH CENTURY. ASHES HISTORICALLY SYMBOLIZE AN OUTER MANIFESTATION OF INNER REPENTANCE AND HUMILITY. THIS PRACTICE IS NOT PRESCRIBED BIBLICALLY BUT IS DEEPLY ROOTED IN CHRISTIAN ANTIQUITY, BRINGING FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST TOGETHER EACH YEAR TO BEGIN THE SEASON OF LENT. JUST AS DANIEL COMES "PLEADING IN EARNEST PRAYER, WITH FASTING, SACKCLOTH AND ASHES" {DN 9:3} AS A SIGN OF ISRAEL'S REPENTANCE, WE TOO COME TOGETHER AS AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF OUR OWN FRAILTY AND NEED FOR RENEWAL. IN THE SERVICE, REMINDED THAT WE ARE DUST AND THAT IT IS TO DUST THAT WE SHALL RETURN {GN 3:19}, ASHES ARE PLACED ON THE PENITENT'S FOREHEAD {IF SO DESIRED} IN THE SHAPE OF A CROSS TO SIGNIFY THE SACRIFICE OF CHRIST, WHICH HAS BROUGHT RECONCILIATION WITH GOD. THESE ASHES ARE IDEALLY MADE FROM BURNING PALM BRANCHES FROM THE PREVIOUS PALM SUNDAY, REMEMBERING JESUS APPROACHING JERUSALEM AND HIS IMMINENT DEATH. ALTHOUGH THE EMPHASIS UPON FRAILTY AND REPENTANCE IS CENTRAL ON ASH WEDNESDAY, THE ANTICIPATION AND HOPE OF EASTER SUNDAY REMAINS PRESENT AND CENTRAL.



*Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. Genesis 2:7*

*For dust you are and to dust you shall return  
Genesis 3:19*

**A MEMENTO MORI** {LATIN FOR 'REMEMBER THAT YOU MUST DIE'} IS AN ARTISTIC AND SYMBOLIC REMINDER OF THE INEVITABILITY OF DEATH. THE EXPRESSION 'MEMENTO MORI' SERVES AS A REMINDER THAT OUR TIME IS LIMITED, THAT WE, LIKE JESUS, MUST PASS THROUGH DEATH IN ORDER TO EXPERIENCE RESURRECTION.



*But we have this treasure  
in jars of clay  
to show that this all-  
surpassing power  
is from God and not from  
us. 2 Cor 4:7*