**Ash Wednesday Service**

**Compiled by Susanne Guenther Loewen**

**NPMC, Feb. 26, 2020**

**Gathering Hymn - HWB #389 - "Take my life"**

**Invocation**

**Lighting the Peace Lamp**

**Hymn #530 - "What Wondrous Love"**

**Scripture Reading - Psalm 51:1-2, 7-12**

**Meditation**

**Blessing**

**Ashes Offered - HWB #247 - "Jesus Remember Me"**

**Benediction**

**Sending Hymn - STJ #77 - "The peace of the Earth be with you"**

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**Gathering Hymn HWB #389 - "Take my life"**

**PATRICK: Invocation** ["Still I Rise", Maya Angelou (excerpt)]

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise....

Out of the huts of history's shame

I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain

I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise.

I rise

I rise.

**Lighting of the Peace Lamp** [Shirley Maya Tan]

On days we feel like scorched earth,

Like corroded rust or trampled dirt,

All we have to do is turn our faces,

Toward the gentle breeze,

And be sprinkled into the four directions,

Be swept away by the wind's tender breath.

We are made holy

Through this burning,

Like a phoenix rising from its ashes

To become more powerful

Than it ever thought possible.

The scorching does not destroy us,

Rather, it burns through the chaff

Until our greatness is revealed

And what's of real value remains.

This is our defining hour,

The moment we are made whole

By what has been made through the burning. …

Let us claim our brilliance within the debris,

Let us dance on the ashes of our previous lesser selves,

Let the stars be engraved into our bones,

And our divine fearless nebula return home.

Ashes to ashes,

Dust to dust,

From the rust,

OUR MASTERPIECE SHALL RISE.

**Hymn #530 - "What Wondrous Love"**

**SUSANNE: Scripture Reading Psalm 51:1-2, 7-12**

Have mercy on me, O God,  
    according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
    blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
    and cleanse me from my sin.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
    wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.  
Let me hear joy and gladness;  
    let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.  
Hide your face from my sins,  
    and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
    and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
    and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
    and sustain in me a [generous] ~~willing~~ spirit.

**Reflection** (Susanne)

Today we mark the beginning of Lent, the first step on our journey toward the cross. As Christians have for many centuries, we mark this season by reminding ourselves and each other of our humanity – of our frailty, our finitude, our mortality. We remember that God created humanity out of the dust of the ground, formed us like a potter sculpting clay. In Genesis 3, God says to Adam and Eve, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” and Psalm 103:14 tells us that God “knows how we were made; [the Divine] remembers that we are dust.”

This is not something that we are reminded of very often in our novelty- and youth-focused culture. This is a message that is decidedly out of fashion. Who wants to think about mortality or frailty, especially on the cusp of Spring? I’m not sure what your congregations’ experiences have been, but here at Nutana Park Mennonite, attendance of our Ash Wednesday service has been quite low, until we no longer held an Ash Wednesday service. Perhaps it seemed too morbid, too macabre – or perhaps it seemed like a distasteful wallowing in feelings of unworthiness and the taint of sin, part of a theology many of us do not find meaningful. Unlike the ancient Israelites, we no longer repent in dust and ashes.

But what if the dust and ash of this day could take on a different meaning? What if it had less to do with cowering before an angry God and more to do with accepting our embodiment as human beings, with all the messiness and uncertainty that entails? And it struck me that this day is really about getting our hands dirty, about remembering that this life is not about purity and keeping ourselves neatly cordoned off from the world. The Psalm we read – a traditional Ash Wednesday psalm – calls on God to wash us and cleanse us from sin, to create clean hearts in us. As Christians, we sometimes idealize separation from the world, of being “in the world but not of it.” Interestingly, this Psalm challenges that, as the cleanness it speaks of is clearly an INWARD thing – clean hearts, right spirits, inner peace. This is not a call to keep our hands and communities pure from the world “out there.”

After all, we follow a God who embraced an embodied, incarnate life. Our God was born in the blood and sweat of a woman, lived among sinners, prostitutes, lepers, and tax collectors. Our God died a humiliating, tortured death at the hands of military occupiers. Our God understood that this life is not a tidy, sanitized experience, but entails imperfection and getting up again after we fall, and hard goodbyes and fierce love of other frail, embodied people. God was not afraid to get the Divine hands dirty for the sake of wholehearted love and compassion. And we should not be afraid to dirty our hands, either.

So as we smear our skin with ashes today, let us remember this: yes, we are made from dust. We are mortal beings who will return to the earth. But we are also beloved children of a God who loves us more than we can comprehend, and whose love permeates this earth and our embodied lives with sacredness, with a holy love that outlasts even death. So yes, we remember that we are dust, but also, in the words of Jan Richardson, “did you not know / what the Holy One / can do with dust?”

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.[[1]](#footnote-1) AMEN

**SUSANNE: Blessing**

[Sojourner Truth (excerpt) & Rend Your Heart by Jan Richardson]

One day, while preparing for a speech at the town-house in Angola, Indiana,  [Sojourner Truth] heard that someone had threatened to burn down the building if she spoke there. "Then I will speak upon the ashes," Sojourner replied.

They are a curious thing, ashes; they are terrible and remarkable by turns.

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To receive this blessing,

all you have to do

is let your heart break.

Let it crack open.

Let it fall apart

so that you can see

its secret chambers,

the hidden spaces

where you have hesitated

to go.

Your entire life

is here, inscribed whole

upon your heart's walls:

every path taken

or left behind,

every face you turned toward

or turned away,

every word spoken in love

or in rage,

every line of your life

you would prefer to leave

in shadow,

every story that shimmers

with treasures known

and those you have yet

to find.

It could take you days

to wander these rooms.

Forty, at least.

And so let this be

a season for wandering,

for trusting the breaking,

for tracing the rupture

that will return you

to the One who waits,

who watches,

who works within

the rending

to make your heart

whole.

**PATRICK AND SUSANNE: Ashes Offered - HWB #247 - "Jesus Remember Me"**

**[Invite people who wish to receive ashes to come forward, if they are able.]**

Blessing: *Remember that you are dust,*

*and remember what the Holy One can do with dust.*

**PATRICK: Benediction** [Will You Meet us by Jan Richardson]

Will you meet us

in the ashes,

will you meet us

in the ache

and show your face

within our sorrow

and offer us

your word of grace:

That you are life

within the dying,

that you abide

within the dust,

that you are what

survives the burning,

that you arise

to make us new.

And in our aching,

you are breathing;

and in our weeping,

you are here

within the hands

that bear your blessing,

enfolding us

within your love.

**Sending Hymn STJ #77 - "The peace of the Earth be with you"**

1. Jan Richardson, “Blessing the Dust,” in *Circle of Grace* (Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015), 89-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)