**Ash Wednesday Service**

**Compiled by Susanne Guenther Loewen**

**NPMC, Feb. 17, 2021 on Zoom**

**Readers: Susanne and Patrick; Music: Lynn Driedger**

**Prelude – 1-2 min.**

**Welcome**

**Call to Worship**

**Gathering Hymn - HWB #389 – “Take my life”** (public domain)

**Lighting the Peace Lamp**

**Words of Confession and Assurance**

**Hymn #530 – “What Wondrous Love”** (public domain – not using harmonies)

**Scripture Reading - Psalm 51:1-2, 10, Psalm 103**

**Meditation**

**Ashes/Oil Offered - HWB #247 – “Jesus Remember Me”** (OL # 00122)

**Blessing**

**Benediction**

**Sending Hymn - STJ #77 – “The peace of the Earth be with you”** (public domain)

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Welcome (Susanne)**

**Call to Worship:**

Susanne: The dust that shapes the journey,

the cross that guides it,

the colour that surrounds it,

the light that fades through it,

the Word that foretells it,

the wilderness that invites it –

**Patrick: this is Lent,**

**And into its wilderness**

**God calls us.**

*P&S: Come,*

*friends,*

*Christ is heading for Jerusalem.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

**Gathering Hymn HWB #389 – “Take my life”** (public domain)

**PATRICK: Lighting of the Peace Lamp** [by 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.

**SUSANNE: Words of Confession and Assurance:**

Holy God, we confess [the frailty of] our humanity, our attachment to earthly treasures, our hypocrisy and hidden idols. Forgive us. We confess our dependence on you, our need for your Holy Spirit, our need for your gifts of earth, air, wind, fire and water, our interdependence with your creation. Grant us peace and mercy to let go of all that keeps us from you.

*(moment of silence)*

From the adamah (soil) of the earth, God shaped us and breathed life into us. Nothing separates us from the love of God. One day, we will all return to the earth from which we’ve been made, fed, nurtured and sustained, and out of which new life comes. What a glorious circle of life!

Ashes to ashes. / Dust to dust.

Life to life. / Love to love. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Hymn #530 – “What Wondrous Love”** (public domain – not using harmonies)

**PATRICK: Scripture Reading (NRSV)**

**Psalm 103**

1Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
    and all that is within me,  
    bless his holy name.  
2Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
    and do not forget all his benefits—  
3who forgives all your iniquity,  
    who heals all your diseases,  
4who redeems your life from the Pit,  
    who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,  
5who satisfies you with good as long as you live  
    so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.

6The Lord works vindication  
    and justice for all who are oppressed.  
7He made known his ways to Moses,  
    his acts to the people of Israel.  
8The Lord is merciful and gracious,  
    slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
9He will not always accuse,  
    nor will he keep his anger forever.  
10He does not deal with us according to our sins,  
    nor repay us according to our iniquities.  
11For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
    so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;  
12as far as the east is from the west,  
    so far he removes our transgressions from us.  
13As a father has compassion for his children,  
    so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.  
14For he knows how we were made;  
    he remembers that we are dust.

15As for mortals, their days are like grass;  
    they flourish like a flower of the field;  
16for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,  
    and its place knows it no more.  
17But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting  
    on those who fear him,  
    and his righteousness to children’s children,  
18to those who keep his covenant  
    and remember to do his commandments.

19The Lord has established his throne in the heavens,  
    and his kingdom rules over all.  
20Bless the Lord, O you his angels,  
    you mighty ones who do his bidding,  
    obedient to his spoken word.  
21Bless the Lord, all his hosts,  
    his ministers that do his will.  
22Bless the Lord, all his works,  
    in all places of his dominion.  
Bless the Lord, O my soul.

**Psalm 51:1-2, 10**

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.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
    and put a new and right spirit within me.

**Reflection** (Susanne)

Lent seems sort of redundant this year, doesn’t it? In our faith tradition, today marks the beginning of Lent, the first step on our journey toward the cross. It is a time of remembering our human frailty, our finitude, our mortality. But we’ve been wandering in a certain kind of wilderness, very aware of our mortality, for almost a year now, in our own extended version of the Lenten season.

As we have made profound sacrifices and rearranged our lives to keep ourselves and each other safe from a deadly virus, we know in our very bones how creaturely and vulnerable we really are. We remember that God created us 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.” In Psalm 103, we hear that God “knows how we were made; [the Divine] remembers that we are dust.” And it continues,

As for mortals, their days are like grass;  
    they flourish like a flower of the field;  
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,  
    and its place knows it no more (v. 14-16).

Last January, on one of the coldest nights of the year, the house two doors down from us burned down. Aside from the disruption of our street, which became a maze of emergency vehicles and then a sheet of ice from the water sprayed by firefighters, I remember how much more smoke and ash there was than I expected. It billowed up, filling the sky on that night, and over the next few days, the smell of it slowly seeped into our house. Our neighbours (right next to the burned house) said the smoke permeated their house to the point of setting off the smoke detectors inside their home. Thankfully, no one was hurt in the fire, but the house wasn’t salvageable, and that pungent ashy, smoky smell of loss is something that stayed with us, that took a while to dissipate.

Given what we have experienced this past year, we don’t need another reminder of our frailty and mortality: the scent of ash and smoke and loss still hangs over us, so to speak. So what then does Lent mean to us this year? I think Lent can remind us this year that in our tradition, there is space – safe and sacred space – to hold our pain, lament, and grief. The season of Lent opens up such a space, and invites us to walk into that wilderness together, with God as our constant companion. Rachel Held Evans put it this way: “the truth is, the church doesn’t offer a cure [for pain or sorrow]. It doesn’t offer a quick fix. The church offers death and resurrection. The church offers the messy, inconvenient, gut-wrenching, never-ending work of healing and reconciliation. The church offers *grace*. … As Brené Brown puts it, ‘I went to church thinking it would be like an epidural, that it would take the pain away … But church isn’t like an epidural; it’s like a midwife … I thought faith would say, ‘I’ll take away the pain and discomfort,’ but what it ended up saying was, ‘I’ll sit with you in it.’”[[3]](#footnote-3) The same God who visited Job on the ash-heap is the God who goes with us through the valley of the shadow of death, and the God whose “steadfast love … is from everlasting to everlasting,” who “is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Psalm 130:8, 17), who brings about longed-for justice for the oppressed. This is the same God who forgives and heals us, “who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s” (Ps. 130:3-5). This is the God who can create in us clean hearts and renew our spirits (Ps. 51:10), the same God who can, in God’s infinite mystery, birth life from an unjust death, as we will celebrate in forty days at the end of our Lenten journey.

So this year during Lent, let us remember the double-edged nature of ashes. We remember that ashes are both a sign of loss and destruction and also fertile, capable of eventually nourishing new life. Ashes, too, play their part in the circle of life through earth and spirit that is the mark of this creative and created universe. Yes, it is true that we are dust, but, as Jan Richardson says, “did you not know / what the Holy One / can do with dust?” She continues,

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.[[4]](#footnote-4) AMEN

**Ashes Offered**

**Susanne: [Instructions for charcoal crosses or oil]**

Blessing: *Leaders: Remember that you are dust,*

[Congregation repeats]

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

[Congregation repeats]

**HWB #247 – “Jesus Remember Me”** (OL # 00122)

**PATRICK: Blessing** [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.

**Benediction**

Susanne: Remember:

we are earth,

**Patrick: and to earth we shall return;**

S: we are ashes

**P: and to ashes we shall return;**

S: we are dust,

**P: and to dust we shall return;**

S: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

*(moment of silence)*

S: Remember:

the One who breathed life into dust

recreates us;

the One whose feet walked the earth

journeys with us;

the One whose embers glow in ashes

becomes in us a living flame.[[5]](#footnote-5)

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

**[Time of visiting if people wish]**

1. Roddy Hamilton (Scotland), #58 in *Voices Together: Worship Leader Edition* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Adapted slightly from the Mennonite Church USA Lent at Home 2021 resources: <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/resource-portal/resource/lent-at-home/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015), 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jan Richardson, “Blessing the Dust,” in *Circle of Grace* (Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015), 89-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sarah Kathleen Johnson, #187 in *Voices Together: Worship Leader Edition* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)