“Fragile Beauty”

A sermon for Ash Wednesday by the Rev. Rachel Wildman

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Ash Wendesday is the type of service that I would have sworn would make me question my “fit” for the priesthood. There is a theology suggested in our prayers and some of the readings we are required to use that makes me bristle—to quote our opening collect and our upcoming psalm, it’s a theology of our wretchedness or wickedness, present apparently from our birth.

This theology is troublesome to me not because it makes me see some truth I don’t want to see, but because of the opposite—it holds up as truth something that I have widely experienced as false. Most of us are, at our core, creatures of love.

And yet somehow, despite the undercurrent of this theology of wretchedness, the Ash Wednesday service is a deeply meaningful beginning to my practice of Lent every year—one that I couldn’t give up.

It is generally not our readings (…even the Gospel), or prayers, or the rich music of this night that I find myself hungry for. It is the ashes—the dusty black marks on my forehead, the words that accompany it, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

You know me…I’m a joyful person…playful…even right here in this sanctuary. I am not one to force gravitas on us simply for the sake of appearing pious or repentant. But, within the safe embrace of our liturgy and our togetherness, becoming present to the impermanence in life, *even my own death*, brings me a quite unexpected comfort.

I have struggled to be able to articulate that feeling of comfort. But, last week, I was reading a reflection on Ash Wednesday by a very thoughtful UCC minister on the Cape named Bruce Epperly. Epperly talked about Ash Wednesday as an awakening to the beauty of fragility,[[1]](#footnote-1) and that was the articulation I was looking for. The feeling I have when I get the ashes on my forehead and am reminded that I am dust, and to dust I shall return, is the same as the long, sighing, breath of relief that I take when I find myself gulping in that glorious, but so transient smell, of rich April dirt; or the warmth I feel laying next to Kate as we share the near final experiences of reading aloud to one another at bedtime; or the gentle peace I felt watching my mother take the slowest of breaths in her last hours.

When we were parishioners at St. John the Divine in New York City, an order of Tibetan monks spent several weeks in one of the side chapels contemplatively creating a sand mandala. The final step in finishing a sand mandala is to stand and appreciate its beauty for some moments, and then to gently blow it away. David and I had the privilege of watching the monks work on their last afternoon in the Cathedral—just hours before they were to blow away the results of their slow, careful, loving, attentive work. The nearly completed mandala, itself, was absolutely gorgeous, but both the fragility of it and its bold impermanence brought an immediacy to the beauty that CRACKED my interior OPEN….I quite literally felt that I could not hold it all—the beauty and power of the moment was intense with divine light—light that is pure wonder and healing love. For me, that feeling, the same feeling I often get on this very night, is a feeling so very close to wholeness….It is the taste of what I imagine eternal life invites us to not just in fleeting moments or in near perfection, but in every moment, fully.

Perhaps you have had this feeling before, too?

Ash Wednesday and its invitation to practicing a holy Lent, at its most transformative, is not about guilt and shame, but about the transcendent power of fragile beauty. Fragile beauty is the realm of God--the divine light that ever surrounds us—a light and love that holds both our sorrow and our joy together as one whole. It creates in us such a deep longing for that beauty that we become willing to take part in creating it, rather than remain in fear of leaving it behind. It empowers us to fully seize the *present* moment, and therefore, both in our individual lives and as the collective Body of Christ in our world, to risk saying what we want to make sure gets said *now*, to listen to what others want to make sure we hear *now*, to protect what cannot be lost yet, and to free what must be freed *now*.

I don’t know what imminently facing my own death is like…my health has not yet been compromised to that degree… but, the experience of facing my own dustiness each Ash Wednesday and throughout Lent leaves me certain that in my death, God will invite me into moments of breathtaking, fragile beauty….of awakening beauty, of healing beauty, of beautiful wholeness.

So, come…come with your fellow travelers…come with me and Chris…and let’s be broken open by the beauty of our fragile, impermanent, and therefore, *holy* lives. In the words of Leonard Cohen’s *Anthem*:

“Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything   
That is how the light gets in.”

AMEN.

1. “Ash Wednesday: A Boomer’s Reflections on Beauty and Mortality”, from Bruce Epperly’s blog *Living a Holy Adventure*, accessed February 25, 2020 via <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2020/02/ash-wednesday-a-boomers-reflections-on-beauty-and-mortality/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)