



From the Pulpit: March 2, 2022

Ash Wednesday

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Genesis 2:4–9

Lent in Plain Sight, I: Dust

Ash Wednesday marks the first day in the Len-ten season and we beginning a new sermon se-ries. Jill Duffield is the editor of the Presbyteri-an Outlook, one of the periodicals of the Pres-byterian Church USA. She has recently written a book *Lent in Plain Sight*, in which she takes eight common objects in our everyday lives, and shows us how they're symbolic of the pas-sion story of Jesus, dust, bread, coins, shoes, thorns, cross, oil, towel, and stones.

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

“be quick to love, and make haste to be kind, for we do not have too much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk the way with us.”

be the pleasantest holiday in the Church Calendar, but it might be important.

What we want to remember on Ash Wednesday is that our destiny is identical to our origin. “William, remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Our origin is dust. This is true both scientifically and theologically. Scientifically, biological life vaulted from inert dust to irrepressible, self-replicating vitality 3.8 billion years ago—less than a billion years after the earth itself originally congealed—from the primordial elements of the third rock from the sun—just a little carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen, and oxygen, assembled into energy maybe by an electric charge. It might have leapt up from the silt

at the bottom of the ocean’s stygian depths, or maybe in geothermal ponds like at Yellowstone.

Theologically Genesis tells us that after planting a lush garden, God bent down and scooped some earth, shaped it into a humanoid form, breathed into it the breath of life, and the man became a living being. If God is good, we will skip and cavort for 80 or 90 years before we return to our origin.

But return we shall. From dust we have come. To dust we shall return. This is our destiny. Our earthly lives are finite. What a grim thought, huh? Why darken a lovely spring day with such a somber reminder?

Ash Wednesday is the day we pause from the tether and pang of our frantic activity to remind ourselves of our mortality. It might not

Well, here's why. You hear me say this all the time: "Life is very, very good, but it is also very, very short. Therefore be quick to love, and make haste to be kind, for we do not have too much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk the way with us." Make the most of what you've got while you've got it.

This afternoon I met remotely with a friend's spiritual support group. They're all in California, clustered around the Stanford campus; I'm here obviously. We gathered virtually to take a look at the book *One Long River of Song*, by Brian Doyle. You've heard me mention Brian Doyle many times before. *One Long River of Song*. Is that a great title or what?

Brian Doyle is my literary and spiritual hero. He hails from a large, pious, Irish Catholic brood. For something like 26 years, Brian was the editor of *Portland Magazine*, the quarterly journal of the University of Portland, the west coast twin to its more famous sister, the University of Notre Dame. Many have called it the finest campus magazine in the land.

In November of 2016, Brian suffered crushing headaches, which at first they thought were migraines, but then the doctors discovered a large brain tumor.

At first the doctors thought that with targeted chemotherapy, they could buy Brian a couple more years to write and to enjoy his family, but four months later, in April, he was in hospice care, and he died in May of 2017. He was 60 years old.

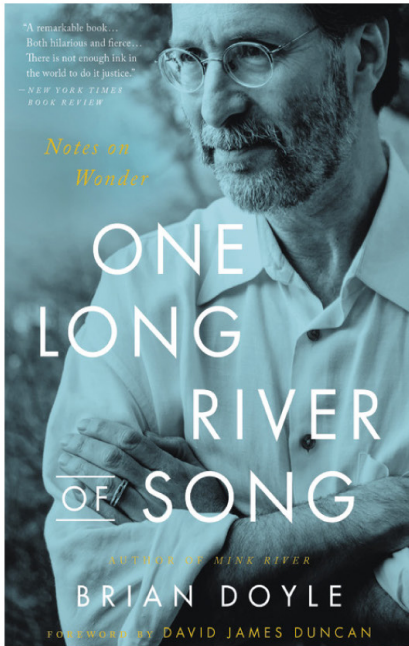
Brian was desperately in love with his wife Mary, an artist. Early in their marriage, Brian and his wife had difficulty conceiving, so they visited the specialists, who told Brian and Mary that they would never have children. When they left the doctor's office, Mary and Brian walked out to their car and wept inconsolably.

But God has a wicked sense of humor. Over the years Mary and Brian had three wonderful children. And near the end Brian remembers those early tears:

"I prayed every day of your life, and for you I will pray in whatever form I am next to take. Lift the rock and I am there; cleave the wood and I am there; call for me and I will listen, for I hope to be a prayer for you and yours long after I am dust and ash."
—Brian Doyle

"Our first tears as parents. Our first tears before we were parents. We have cried many tears since for many reasons, and our children have been tumultuous, and troubled, and in great danger, and our marriage has been wonderfully confusing, and troubled, and in great danger; but even now all these years later, every few weeks I will find myself in tears for what seems like no reason at all; and I know it is because we were blessed with children, three of them, three long wild prayers; and they are the greatest gifts a profligate mercy ever granted shuffling muddled me. When I am in my last hour, when I am very near death, when I am so soon to change form and travel in unaccountable ways and places, I hope I will be of sound enough mind to murmur this, to our three children: it was for you that I was here, and for you I prayed every day of your life, and for you I will pray in whatever form I am next to take. Lift the rock and I am there; cleave

the wood and I am there; call for me and I will listen, for I hope to be a prayer for you and yours long after I am dust and ash."



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Our earthly lives are finite. Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. But God is good and will not abandon us to the dust of the earth. Robert Frost said, “In three words I can sum up everything I know about life: It goes on.”

Brian Doyle says, “We’re only here for a minute. We’re here for a little window. And to use that time to catch and share shards of light and laughter and grace seems to me the great story.” “I would sing my books if I could.”

So sing and pray while you’ve time, catch and share shards of light and laughter and grace while you can, and then, when there is nothing left of your corporeal existence but dust and ash maybe, just maybe, if God is good your song and your prayer will go on and on. They’ll lift the rock and you’ll be there. They’ll cleave the wood and you’ll be there. They will call to you, and you will listen, an everlasting prayer for those who gladdened your heart every single day.

—Prayers of the People—
By The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

God, meet us in the dust,
in the mud,
in the dirt,
in the blessing of this night.

For here tonight we remember again
that in the fragility and beauty of this,
your creation,
you have formed us from the ordinary
and blessed it and called it sacred.

We belong to you.
We feel your blessing on our forehead,
the anointing of love,
the inscribing with ash the the tenderness
of your promises to us.

As we trace the contours of our own lives,
we notice the ways in which you
have been our refuge,
our strength,
ever-present,
even as we await the storm to pass us by.

Be with us in the storms of this day:
the worries of war,
the realities of international conflict,
the trouble as people flee their homes
or take up arms undesired,
a world filled with violence, injustice,
chaos, and impossible possibilities.

Be safety for the frightened.
Be balm for the wounded.
Be sight for those who feel invisible.
Be protection for those seeking
safe harbor by day and safe haven by night.

In you, may my soul take refuge.
In you, may the lost find direction.
In you, may the hungry find food.
In you, may the bullied find courage.
In you may the worried find peace.

Be for us the gentle wind of holy change,
your breath within my breath,
inspiration, imagination, and strength.

Stay with us dawn to dusk and on to dawn again.

For you search us and you know us.
You move us beyond taking our lives for granted.
You root us in the reality that each day,
each moment is a gift,
a chance to start again,
an opportunity to know that we are treasured,
that we belong to you,
and live in your love.

May the mud beneath our feet be
a reminder of tonight's blessing.

May the ash on our forehead bind us
to your anointing spirit
that goes with us from today
into a thousand tomorrows.

May you journey with us through the mud,
and guide us through the night,
a peace that passes understanding,
a deep embodied sigh beyond words.

Bless us, O God, into this night. Amen.

Our Father....Amen.