

**ASH WEDNESDAY (C) March 2, 2022**  
**Psalm 51:1-12; Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 103:8-14; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**  
**(2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10)**  
**University Lutheran Church, Cambridge, MA;**  
**Imogene A. Stulken**  
***Ecumenical Prayer Cycle: Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands***

**“Just Remember”**

As I was jotting down thoughts for this sermon, I suddenly noticed the notepad I'd happened to choose. Written in large letters at the top of each page were the words “Just Remember”.

*To remember* is to have in one's mind, or to be able to bring to one's mind, “an awareness of (someone or something that one has seen, known, or experienced in the past).” [Oxford Languages dictionary, Google] But what, exactly, are we being called to “just remember”?

On this Ash Wednesday, I invite us to focus on remembering three things:

1) I invite us to remember that *God* remembers how we are made – and to consider what difference that might make.

2) I invite us to remember that we are free to *ask* God to remember.

And 3) I invite us to each remember our Baptism.

So, first, I invite us to remember that *God* remembers how we are made – and to consider what difference that might make.

According to our sacred texts, humans aren't the only ones capable of remembering. So, too, is God. Addressing God, the psalmist says in Psalm 103, one of our texts for this evening:

“For you know well how we are formed;  
you remember that we are but dust.” [v. 14]

After the Hymn of the Day, we will turn to the Ash Wednesday Remembrances. Here the words will remind us that Lent calls us to remember that “we are dust and to dust we shall return”.

*Dust* – On the micro-level, I’m guessing that most of us are quite familiar with the fine dry powder in our homes that builds up on furniture or hides in corners. On a significantly larger scale, many of us may call to mind images of clouds of dust from the collapse of the Twin Towers; much of this dust was pulverized concrete and highly toxic.

But here, tonight, on Ash Wednesday, let us consider dust and remembrance on the largest scale of all – in terms of how we as beings were formed. You see, God knows how we were formed. The second creation account in Genesis tells us that the LORD God formed the earth creature from the dust of the earth – and then the LORD God breathed into its nostrils, and it became a living being. [Genesis 2:7; also Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978, p. 75] So, yes, God knows well how we are formed and remembers not only that we are dust, but that we are *but* dust.

However, God’s recalling that we are “but dust” is not meant to be demeaning. Nor is God remembering us as nothing more than a nuisance to be swept away with a flick of the wrist into a divine dustpan. Rather, the late great Swedish theologian and Lutheran pastor (and member of this congregation), Krister Stendahl, once said that this verse of our Psalm text simply means that God knows that we are *fragile*.

But for God to remember that we are fragile does not mean that we are like glass ornaments or some family heirloom to be taken out periodically, used for decoration, and then stored away

in the back of some closet somewhere gathering dust. It *does* mean that we are to treat each other with care, as if we could be harmed by mistreatment.

To help us remember *that*, what if we imagined that we each wore a sash across our chest that said “fragile” or “handle with care” or even “not feeling well today”? What difference would it make? What if any difficult family members or co-workers wore such a sash? Would that make any difference in our attitude toward them? What if, when we considered those whom we fear, whom we dislike intensely, whom we view as enemies, or, who are, in fact, imperiling the world, what if, when we looked at *them*, we saw the words “handle with care”? Could that affect how we respond to them? Would that affect how we remember them?

As humans, who are formed from the earth, and who will return to the earth as dust, we are called to serve and to care for, the earth. Unfortunately, humans have not always treated the earth with care. Do you remember the stories of what happened in the Americas across the 1930s? Overcultivation, poor land management, and a failure to appreciate climate conditions led to the Dust Bowl that greatly affected the American and Canadian prairies. What if the *earth* had one giant “fragile” sign we could see stretched across its oceans and fields? Could it make a difference? *Would* it make a difference?

One more point before we leave this first focus: Verse 14 is where we learn that God remembers that we are dust. But *before* that, in verse 8, we hear that God is “full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” Psalm 103:8, ELW] *This* is the context in which God remembers that we are dust: a context of deep compassion, mercy, and love overflowing!

My second invitation for us tonight is to remember that we are free to *ask* God to remember.

Several psalms speak of the people remembering God's actions. For example, a personal remembering: "I remember your name in the night, O LORD, / and keep your law." [Psalm 119:55, NRSV] Or, a corporate remembering: "They remembered that God was their rock, / the Most High God their redeemer." [Psalm 78:35, NRSV] Then there's also the imperative to remember: "Remember the marvels God has done, / the wonders and the judgments of God's mouth." [Psalm 105:5, ELW]

But the psalmist also applies this imperative to *God's very self*, calling upon *God* to remember: "Remember your congregation ..." [Psalm 74:2a, NRSV] "Remember how short my time is – " [Psalm 89:47, NRSV]; "Remember, O LORD, how your servant is taunted ..." [Psalm 89:50] And: "Remember your word to your servant, in which you have made me hope." [Psalm 119:49, NRSV]

But one of my *favorite* examples of beseeching God to remember comes from Psalm 25. Here, the psalmist is bold to tell God to remember divine mercy and love:

<sup>6</sup>**Be mindful** of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,  
for they have been from of old.

But the psalmist doesn't stop there:

<sup>7</sup>**Do not remember** the sins of my youth or my transgressions;  
according to your steadfast love **remember** me,  
for your goodness' sake, O LORD! [Psalm 25:7, NRSV]

I've always appreciated these verses. They ask God to *remember* the supplicant, but they also ask God to *not* remember – to remember *not* the sins of youth, to *not* remember the supplicant's transgressions. These words take me back to the beginning of this evening's service and the Confession and Forgiveness. Do you remember the words of absolution? The assurance given is that "by the saving love of Jesus Christ, the wisdom and power of God, [our] sins are forgiven, and God remembers them no more"! So we trust that what the psalmist asks God to do is, in fact, what God has done – and done for us.

We will hear these same themes – of saving love and of sins forgiven – later in the service when we share the Eucharist. As we lift the bread and as we lift the cup, we remember Jesus' words, "Do this in remembrance of me." [Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25] This remembrance is *anamnesis*, the re-presentation of God's past gracious acts in the present to make them present with us now. We remember Jesus' command, life-giving passion and death, glorious resurrection and ascension, and the promise of coming again. At the same time as we are *remembering*, "we are also *re-membered*, [that is,] put back together again."  
[\[https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-is-communion-simply-a-ritual-of-remembrance\]](https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-is-communion-simply-a-ritual-of-remembrance)

If I really think about it, I find it rather amazing that God does not remember sins and transgressions. And then I wonder: What about for us? What things would be better that *we* not remember? Grudges, perhaps, or slights? Perceived failures, or, possibly, times we weren't perfect – that kept us from moving on? Such things could be good to let go. However, I want to acknowledge here that, although we might not consciously

remember the trauma of war or abuse, the *body* remembers. In fact, trauma “leaves a real, physical imprint” on the body, jarring memory storage processes and changing the brain. And it's not just the brain; even our body's *cells* can remember past trauma. [<https://medium.com/@biobeats/how-unprocessed-trauma-is-stored-in-the-body-10222a76cbad>] I note also that there are things we can *no longer* remember, even if we wanted to. For example, there are those who have experienced memory loss due to Alzheimer's. In such cases, I like to think that God would *not* forget, but that God would remember *for* us, that God would be the Memory Keeper.

And now, turning to the third focus point of the sermon, I invite us to remember our Baptism.

If we were baptized as infants or as very young children, we likely have no conscious memory of our Baptism itself. We may, however, have heard family stories of that day. I learned from my mom that my baptismal sponsors – her brother and his wife, my Uncle Wilbur and Aunt Irene – couldn't attend my baptism because they were both ill with trichinosis. If we were baptized as older children or as adults, however, we likely *can* remember the day and have stories we can share with each other.

“Every day when you wash your face, remember your baptism.” That line has been attributed to Martin Luther. However, as Timothy Wengert – an ELCA pastor, author, and professor emeritus – says: “Despite it sounding ‘like Luther,’ it doesn't really match 16th-century hygiene, where the notion of washing your face wasn't necessarily a daily chore.” (And I would add, “At least not in that part of Europe”.) Wengert notes that, for Luther, “the difference between baptismal water and regular water is the word and promise of God. Thus, washing

your face is good for your face, but returning to your baptism daily is always a matter of trusting God's promise of forgiveness, life and salvation offered there." In fact, continues Wengert, Luther "placed baptism at the center of the Christian life. We never lose God's baptismal promises to us but may always return to them." [<https://www.livinglutheran.org/2015/02/mythbusting/>]

At our Baptism, the pastor dipped a finger in oil and traced the cross of Christ on our forehead. Tonight as we remember our Baptism – and as we remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return, we will use *water* to mark the sign of the cross not only on our foreheads, but also on our ears, eyes, lips, heart, shoulders, hands, and feet. As we make the sign of the cross on our bodies, let us receive the cross as a sign of God's endless love and mercy for us.

The ELW includes an order for the Affirmation of Baptism. From that liturgy comes a question asked to those who are making affirmation of their Baptism:

Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism:

to live among God's faithful people,

to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper,

to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,

to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?

Each person responds: "I do, and I ask God to help and guide us."

Another question follows in that liturgy, this time addressed to the congregation: “People of God, do you promise to support and pray for one another in your life in Christ?” The accompanying response is: “We do, and we ask God to help and guide us.” [ELW, p. 237]

We ask God – the God, who formed us and who remembers how we are made – we ask this very God to remember us, to help us, and to guide us as *we* remember our baptism and strive to live out our baptismal calling.

But there’s more: With the cross of Christ marked on our foreheads, we reach out to help others in the community to remember *their* Baptism and to support them in their baptismal life as well – as together we “strive for justice and peace in all the earth.”

So, on this Ash Wednesday: Just remember ...

Just remember that *God* remembers how we are made – and this makes all the difference.

Just remember that we are free to *ask* God to remember us – to remember us as individuals, as well as the diverse peoples on this precious, priceless Earth.

And: Just remember your Baptism – and, daily, from it draw strength and comfort.

Just remember ...

Amen.