

Ash Wednesday Service
Compiled by Susanne Guenther Loewen
NPMC, March 2, 2022 – In Person and Livestream

Readers: Susanne and Patrick; Music: Lynn Driedger & Fern Stockdale Winder

Prelude – VT 9 – Come Away from Rush and Hurry

Welcome

Call to Worship

Gathering Hymn – VT 127 – Bless the Lord, My Soul

Lighting the Peace Lamp

Words of Confession and Assurance

Hymn – VT 423 – God the Sculptor of the Mountains

Scripture Reading – Jeremiah 18:1-11; 2 Corinthians 4:5-10

Meditation - Susanne

Ashes/Oil Offered - HWB #247/VT 327 – “Jesus Remember Me” (OL # 00122)

Blessing

Benediction

Sending Hymn - STJ #77/VT 838 – “The Peace of the Earth Be with You” (public domain)

Welcome (Susanne)

(Invite those worshipping from home to have a candle and olive oil ready.)

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

Gathering Hymn VT 127 – Bless the Lord, My Soul

¹ Roddy Hamilton (Scotland), #58 in *Voices Together: Worship Leader Edition* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2020).

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

² Adapted slightly from the Mennonite Church USA Lent at Home 2021 resources:
<https://www.mennoniteusa.org/resource-portal/resource/lent-at-home/>

Hymn - VT 423 – God the Sculptor of the Mountains

PATRICK: Scripture Reading (NRSV)

Jeremiah 18:1-11:

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²“Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” ³ So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴ The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

⁵ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶ Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷ At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸ but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. ⁹ And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. ¹¹ Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

2 Corinthians 4:5-10

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. ⁶ For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. ⁷ But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

Reflection (Susanne)

I begin with an excerpt from an Ash Wednesday poem called “Earthen Vessels,”

by Phuc Luu:

“Bodies made of dirt / Earth and soil / Remembering who we are / Not gods / But the image of God / Not divine / But the likeness of the divine ...

The ashes on the forehead mark the mind / To remind us of the person who we are / As temporary persons / Who leave our imprint / By way of our love for one another / Not by way of power / Nor control / But the gentle hands of a sculptor / Shaping us

In cooperation, / In co-creation / Creation shaped by the created / Created shaping the creator / The artist seeing themselves in the earthenware.”³

³ Phuc Luu, “Earthen Vessels,” *The Work of the People: Films for Discovery and Transformation*, accessed March 2, 2022, <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/earthen-vessels>

When I was seven years old, we visited family in Paraguay, where my dad grew up. My cousin (who is now a professional artist) was endlessly creative. Even then, as a ten-year-old, she was always working on some craft or art project. One of the activities she showed me how to make on that visit was a clay ornament. Now, we might think of going to a craft supply store to purchase some clay, but that wasn't an option there. It also wasn't necessary. Instead, my cousin knew where in the yard to find clay just there, in the ground. She scooped it out and added water and we moulded the reddish clay with our hands into ornaments. And she made a little fire on the ground for us to fire them so they hardened. So a piece of the ground became a beautiful clay gift for us to take home with us.

When I think of God as a potter, I think of my cousin, the artist, taking clay out of the ground itself, shaping it into her chosen shape, and passing it through the fire into its final form. Could it be that creation is as simple and as miraculous as this?

In our Scripture passages for today, God is depicted as our Divine Potter, and we are the pots and bowls and goblets shaped by God's hands. This imagery recalls the creation story at the beginning of Genesis, when 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."

So the prophet Jeremiah is sent to a potter's house in Jeremiah 18, to listen to God's word there. And Jeremiah sees the potter, "working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him" (v. 3-4). And Jeremiah sees in the potter God's ability

to build up or to destroy the nations and kingdoms of the world. Now while Jeremiah uses this imagery to speak words of judgment to wayward Judah and Jerusalem, I wonder if we can see God the Potter in a more gracious way, able to rework even the spoiled pot into something good. This is what Jeremiah observed in the potter's house: a spoiled pot being spun again, until it was good in the potter's eyes. Kate Bowler, who writes about faith and terminal illness, speaks of Lent as "the saddest time of year," before the exuberant joy of Easter. Lent, for her, "is the perfect time to accept the world as it is: too hard, too broken, too overwhelming. God will save the world, but during Lent, we get to be honest about the reality of the world that is *NOT YET* [as it should be]. I find it a tremendous spiritual relief to have this time for gorgeous, hard, refreshing honesty," she concludes.⁴ Yes, we are mortal and fragile and made of dust. Lent lets us face that and accept it, within the knowledge that God can bring all kinds of beauty and goodness from that dust, that even that dust is beloved.

The Apostle Paul describes something similar in 2 Corinthians, when he speaks about "treasure in clay jars." He speaks about sacred power, light, and life that we have within us, that is visible in us. Though we are just mortals, vulnerable and simple "clay jars," God has given us the treasure of life. We bear the image of God who can bring life even out of death. In a time of great sorrow and suffering, Paul can therefore affirm words of hope: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies." This is the treasure in clay jars that we are: hope that remains

⁴ Kate Bowler, Facebook post, Feb. 25, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/katecbowler/videos/3269469726627472/>

despite all the brokenness. After all, though pottery is so breakable, it also can last for thousands of years.

It has been a long two years. Many of us are tired – tired of feeling so vulnerable during the pandemic, of the brokenness of our world, of yet another pointless war, of the injustices borne of ignorance and a lack of compassion for one another. The clay vessel seems spoiled, just a lump of dirt. But in the strong and loving hands of our Potter, that lump of clay can take its place again on the wheel, and be spun and shaped into something truly beautiful, into a treasure, an earthen vessel in the very image of the Divine. Thanks be to God our Potter, for this resurrection creativity. As we step into Lent, I invite us to wait for it in hope. 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]⁵

VT 327/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:

⁵ Words from: Jan Richardson, “Blessing the Dust,” in *Circle of Grace* (Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015), 89-90.

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.⁶

Sending Hymn VT 838/STJ #77 - "The peace of the Earth be with you" (public domain)

⁶ Sarah Kathleen Johnson, #187 in *Voices Together: Worship Leader Edition* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2020).