

**Doing and Being are Blessed**  
**Ash Wednesday, February 26, 2020**  
**Rev. Dr. Anne Miner-Pearson**

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And so the shifting of focus begins. A new liturgical season is upon us. Images of light in Epiphany are behind us. The beads and masks of a New Orleans Mardi Gras celebration are packed away for another year. We begin the season of Lent today. Even as we begin, we are aware of stark differences. Lent begins on a Wednesday, not a Sunday as all the other liturgical seasons do. Our service today has its own section in the Book of Common Prayer, a special designation reserved for only a few rituals. And today could seem to some as an odd ritual. How could ashes be a symbol of a beginning when they are usually the sign of the end, what's left after the light and warmth of a fire? Also the altar is bare of flowers with leaves and buds. The water has been drained from the baptismal font. As well, the pew chairs rearranged and the choir has moved to sit among us.

Yet, there's another clue that we are entering a new spiritual season. In just moments, all of us will be invited to come forward in a line with friends and strangers. We will stand to receive a grey-black smudge on our forehead. We will be marked. Amazingly, a mark our eyes can't immediately see, but others can. Marked with ashes: "remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Ashes making the sign of the cross. We usually think as a sign of the cross being used in positive moments as with oil at a baptism, over the bread and wine at Eucharist, over the congregation after confession and before going back into our ministries out in the world. How odd to receive a blessing using ashes, a reminder of death. How can it be that a cross marked with ashes is a blessing.

"Blessing is a dusting off of what things really are." I heard that recently and it struck me the perfect way to think of Ash Wednesday. "Blessing is a dusting off of what things really are." Endings and death are how things really are. All the ways and times each of us are less than loving, less than kind, less able to forgive, less compassionate, less generous - all are really how things are. Duck it. Deny it. Rationalize it. Project it on others. Excuse it all we want and in all ways we do. Still, Ash Wednesday's blessing is a dusting off of what things really are. So we come forward. We stand and have the courage and honesty to take our place. We stand in the fullness of who we really are.

When my niece's son was a toddler busy discovering mischief when hidden from her sight, she would call out, "Cooper, what are you doing? What are you doing?" And like a toddler, he answered her in his own creative, limited way. From the other room, he outed himself and answered, "Doing. Doing".

Such a funny and cute story that it's retold in my family and yet, on this beginning of Lent, a toddler's urge to reveal his mischief is also a reminder that each of us needs to own parts of ourselves we would like to hide from others, even ourselves and God. Ashes on our forehead are a way of our saying "doing, doing". This ashy blessing is a dusting off of who we are, no matter our age. We stand in the fullness of what we really are.

Yet, these ashy marks are more than random smudges. They are made in the shape of Jesus' cross because we believe his cross is a sign of more than death. By Jesus' trusting himself to God's endless gift of life, his cross becomes not just an ending but also a beginning. The cross also proclaims what

really is - God's presence of new life in all death. The cross gives us the courage to wear the blessing of ashes. We can come forth and be dusted off. We can know and name our own "doing" because we know, through Jesus, forgiveness and new beginnings are always possible. The blessing of ashes this day dusts off that we are really God's beloved, that our "being" is what really is holy.

Just the Creation story tells of humanity being formed both by dust and God's holy hands, so this day holds out both our failures and our glory, both limits and potential, our union of flesh and spirit. With ashes, we have been dusted off so we can see what things really are. We take the first steps into the season of Lent, steps taken with a blessing on our journey. In Lent, we are invited to become more aware, name and put our "doing" in its proper place. In Lent, we are invited to discover how to live more fully from our "being", the image of God within us. In following Jesus, God shows us a path into new life when we walk the way of the cross. May we have a holy and blessed Lent. Amen.