

Ash Wednesday, 2014

There is a beautiful song I love to hear as Lent begins on this Ash Wednesday. Perhaps you know it too:

*We rise again from ashes, from the good we've failed to do.
We rise again from ashes, to create ourselves anew.
If all our world is ashes, then must our lives be true,
An offering of ashes, an offering to you.*

*We offer you our failures, we offer you attempts.
The gifts not fully given, the dreams not fully dreamt.
Give our stumblings direction, give our visions wider view,
An offering of ashes and offering to you.*

*Then rise again from ashes, let healing come to pain.
Though spring has turned to winter, and sunshine turned to rain.
The rain we'll use for growing, and create the world anew,
An offering of ashes, an offering to you.*



Many years ago, I participated in a nonviolent witness outside the Los Alamos nuclear laboratories in New Mexico with other people of faith, led by Rev. John Dear, a now former Jesuit Priest. John leads these vigils every year to coincide with Hiroshima Day. I happened to be at Ghost Ranch at the peacemaking conference and some of the attendees would go to the vigil. When we arrived John explained the ritual we'd be engaging in. Everyone got a sackcloth to wear over our clothes, really a feed bag of some sort. And then we got a Ziploc baggie filled with ashes. There were over 100 of us there that day. We sang some songs together and then filed out to fan out around part of the perimeter of the lab. The instructions were at a certain time to open the Ziploc bag, dump the ashes on the ground by the sidewalk and to sit down in them in silence for 30 minutes. After that we could go back to where we had started for more song together and a shared meal.

The idea of course was that we would sit in the ashes, patterning ourselves after the biblical stories of those who sat in ashes as a sign of their mourning, distress or desolation. We were also patterning ourselves after those in the biblical story who are seeking redemption and a new life that is aligned with God's dream of peace for all of Creation. Putting ourselves out in the community in a visible way, we were signaling that as people of faith we were seeking that for others.

I had a very hard time that day sitting in my sackcloth alone with my ashes. I felt weird and strange. I felt like everyone was looking at me. I wanted to get up and stop sitting there. I had a hard time concentrating. It was like an eternity.

Sitting with the ashes we will receive today on our foreheads is hard. Hearing the words, and saying the words: "Remember you are dust and to dust you will return,"

is jarring. Being reminded of our mortality and of our limits is not something any of us want to hear.

But it is how we begin.

It is how we find a way to be made new.

It is how we are reminded of the depth of need we have for grace.

We are dust. And at some point we will return to dust.

But our lives, our communities and the ministries to which we have been called are precious gifts. And we are resurrection people.

The Psalmist says:

You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.

O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever. (Psalm 30)

What ashes can we sit in and linger with this Lenten Season?

Where are we mourning?

Where are we dancing?

Where do we long to be reminded of grace?

How can we offer blessings and grace to others this Lent?

May your forty days this Lent as you lead so many diverse and varied communities of faith be blessed. I know what an honor, privilege and trust it is to guide others through this sacred season and to offer them the Story of new life, spiritual renewal and transformation. I am holding you in my prayers as you lead, minister and serve.

We rise again from ashes, to create ourselves anew.

God's Peace to you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Shannan".

Rev. Shannan Vance-Ocampo, Transitional Presbyter