

## Ash Wednesday Sermon 2026



This image has been created as part of a Lenten series by Sarah Lea West.

This first one in the series invites us to meditate on “dust,” that symbol we invoke in our liturgy when we are marked with the ash cross, and we hear the words spoken over us “you are dust, and to dust you will return.”

Let’s take time with this image now – I’ll offer you some of the things that particularly speak to me. You might notice some different things, or interpret them differently, and that’s fine – that’s the beauty of art.

I see an interplay of earth and air, of groundedness and lightness. The open hand lies flat, resting in and on the earth. And yet at the same time, the “dust” of who we are floats upwards, particles ascending and descending like Jacob’s ladder, connecting heaven and earth, while a breeze, a breath, moves them about. This is the paradox, the mystery of our humanity. We are simultaneously of the soil, and of the spirit.

The moth carries the whisper of our heart’s longings for transformation – to know that one day our earthy, mortal, selves will be transfigured into an utterly new way of being.

Stars are shining in the sky, a reminder that all of our mortal dust is also the dust from an ancient star, enlivened by the breath of God. There is dignity and mystery and a connectedness in how we are formed, and while our bodies and minds may at times frustrate or betray us, they are fearfully and wonderfully made out of the very stuff of the universe.

One of the stars in the image is in the shape of a cross. We bring our dusty selves to the threshold of a forty day journey to discover how the

cross of Christ will grasp hold of us this year – how will it take and mould and change and save us once again? In all our struggle and pain and confusion we are dust that is beloved and redeemed. How will that grace speak to me, and us, this Lenten season?

And finally, there is a tendril of growth, a new shoot, emerging from the palm of the hand. Our dust is soil, the ground from which new life can emerge. I think of stigmata, I think of the nail wounds in the hand of Jesus Christ, the palm held open in surrender, and see that new shoots can grow from a place of suffering.

Out of all these possibilities, let's stay with this image of dust as soil, humus, the earth from which we were created, and to which we will return when we die. This image gives us another way to think about the ash that is the central symbol of today's liturgy.

Traditionally in the church, ashes have been used to signify repentance and mourning. While these resonances are indeed present in our use of ashes today, thinking of dust as soil reminds us that ash can also be a potent fertilizer.

Those of you who garden will know that ashes are often an ingredient in compost, to create healthy, nutrient-rich soil. Fire and ash are also part of the cycle of regeneration for forests and fields – in some places farmers routinely burn their fields, which rids them of weeds and fertilizes the soil.

Lent is not just a season for noticing what troubles us or offends God about our lives. Lent is a season of preparation for new life, making way for the green shoots of generosity, service, and solidarity to flourish within us and our communities. However, the process of getting to new life insists that we are intentional about the inner conditions that support life. What needs to happen, what needs to change, for us to become the kind of people who can break the yoke of injustice, share bread and shelter with the hungry and homeless, to refuse to point the finger and speak evil of anyone?

Religious discipline is not an end in itself, and as Jesus warns us, certainly not something we put on to be seen as holy by anyone else. It's about creating the space for God, the Gardener, to tend the soil of our hearts and minds. Religious discipline is clearing, and waiting. Waiting to see what seeds will arrive and germinate within the prepared soil of our hearts. Self-denial, if we choose to practice it, is simply the act of weeding out some of the things that addict or distract our bodies and minds from being responsive to God. We do this and we wait on the brooding Spirit of God, the way a fallow garden waits on the sun, the rain, and the floating seeds.

We receive the ash cross as a sign of our willingness to give ourselves to the clearing, the digging, the aerating, and the fertilizing that will nourish what God wants to plant and tend in and among us.

What do you particularly need this Lent for the ash cross on your forehead to become a sign of a fertile and nourished heart? How will you make space to listen to the voice of wisdom, and of conscience? How will you ground yourself when you find your attention being yanked this way and that by all the clamouring demands of a hyper-connected life? How will you find a rhythm, some simplicity, to allow for stillness and waiting on God? How will you invite God to open what has been closed – whether eyes, ears, heart, fist, or mind?

Whatever this looks like for you, chances are good that this Lent will be only a small part, or a momentary coming into focus, of a longer work that God is doing to re-create our beloved dust in the image of Christ. And so I finish with some words from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.  
We are quite naturally impatient in everything  
to reach the end without delay.  
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.  
We are impatient of being on the way  
to something unknown,

something new.

Yet it is the law of all progress, that it is made  
by passing through some stages of instability,  
and that may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you.

Your ideas mature gradually. Let them grow.

Let them shape themselves without undue haste.

Do not try to force them on

as though you could be today what time

— that is to say, grace —

and circumstances

acting on your own good will

will make you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new Spirit  
gradually forming in you will be.

Give our Lord the benefit of believing

that his hand is leading you,

and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself  
in suspense and incomplete.

Above all, trust in the slow work of God,  
our loving vine-dresser. Amen.

The Rev'd Brenda Rockell

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