

Ash Wednesday
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
March 2, 2022

From the Ashes
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'Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your God in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your God who sees in secret will reward you.

'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your God who sees in secret will reward you.

'And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your God who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'

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What do the Plateosaurus, palm trees, and platypuses all have in common? They all start with the letter 'P!' And more importantly, they're all carbon-based life forms. And so are we. Carbon is a key component of all life on

earth – of plants, of animals, and, of course, human beings. It's also an important element in soil – the same soil that, according to the ancient Genesis myth, God used to fashion the very first humans.

Today we begin the season of Lent together and we start it all off with a heap of burned palm leaves smudged on our foreheads in the shape of a cross. When we burn the palm branches from the previous year's Palm Sunday celebration, we're essentially reducing them to carbon – that common element found in all life. Since the times of the Hebrew Bible, ashes have been worn as a sign of repentance and regret. For us, however, the ashes mean so much more.

When we put on ashes, we do so as a reminder that humans, like all living things, are mortal, limited, finite. But the ashes also serve to remind us that all life is made up of the same building blocks – that indeed, Plateosaurus, palm trees, platypuses, and people all share something in common and, when we die, our bodies become the very soil in which new life takes root.

Our reading from Matthew's gospel serves to remind us of our mortality by urging us not to lay up for ourselves treasures on earth. Mortality is one of those things that people don't like to talk about very much. Ash Wednesday names it – we are dust – and claims it – to dust we shall return. Ash Wednesday also reframes it. We're all made of the same stuff and when we die, we go back to the same stuff, and that's the very stuff where new life starts in the nutrients we leave behind. By naming it and claiming it, Ash Wednesday allows us to reframe mortality so that it's not something to fear or avoid. In fact, I think it's something to celebrate.

We wear our ashes as a reminder that we are mortal and that means we share something with Plateosaurus and palm trees and platypuses. It also means that we share something with the lifeforms that inhabit the earth when we cease to. Ash Wednesday is about much more than repentance, it's about celebrating the connectedness of all life on earth – of the common building blocks we share, and the promise that new life springs forth from spent bodies.

So today, as you put on ashes, remember that you are carbon, that you are earth-stuff and dinosaur-stuff and palm tree-stuff and platypus-stuff. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. And remember that new life always rises from the ashes. Thanks be to God.