

Sermon for Ash Wednesday 2023  
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church  
Los Alamos, New Mexico  
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney

Joel 2:1-2,12-17  
Psalm 103  
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10  
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

“You are dust and to dust you shall return.”

I'd like to share something from the opening of the book of Genesis.

When God began to create the heavens and the earth,  
the earth was complete chaos,  
and darkness covered the face of the deep,  
while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.  
Then God said, “Let there be light,”  
and there was light.  
And God saw that the light was good,  
and God separated the light from the darkness.

Jumping ahead:

And God said,  
“Let there be lights in the dome of the sky ...  
God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ...  
And God saw that it was good.  
And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

Did you notice the difference?

God separated the light from the darkness on the first day.  
God did not create the sun and the moon until the fourth day.

What is the light? What is the darkness?

This is something I have been pondering for some time.  
What is the darkness?

This is a day of ashes when a cross is smudged on our foreheads  
to remind us of our mortality.  
The ashes are dark, but they are not darkness.

The obvious answer to “what is darkness?”  
– it’s the absence of the light.

I have seen the light.  
I had my annual eye exam on Monday,  
and when the doctor points that lens over my eye  
I saw the light – so intense it hurt.

Once upon a time, it was believed the universe was static:  
it was, is is, it will always be.  
Then in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century it was determined the universe was expanding outward from the bright  
light of the Big Bang.

Measuring the Light established the mass of the universe,  
and according to calculations,  
Theorists suggested there was insufficient mass  
to support continued expansion,  
so the universe eventually should contract.  
However, further experiments showed the rate of expansion  
was accelerating.  
How can that be?

God separated the light from the darkness on the first day.  
Light and Darkness are substantial.

We know the universe by what either absorbs or emits light.  
What might exist that can hide from all our means of knowing?  
Can something exist that we cannot see,  
but we know is there because of its gravitational affects.  
The dual nature of this darkness is called Dark Matter and Dark Energy.  
A new conundrum to puzzle after in a post-Doc future.

On the first day, in the beginning,  
God separated the light from the darkness,  
and apparently, the darkness and the light co-exist  
as elemental and intertwining aspects of all of creation.

We are each God's creation.  
Out of the dust of the earth God created humankind.

We are dust and to dust we shall return.

This would seem to be a statement of how low we are in the way of things, but there's more to us  
and more to the dust from which we are created.

We are the recipients of the dust of creation  
– inheritors of the billions of years of evolution  
from the beginning when God created the Universe  
exploding out of hydrogen atoms from one infinitely dense moment.

Eventually those hydrogen atoms coalesced to form nebulae that fueled the formation of stars and planets, and in the fullness of time  
– all that we see around us and we ourselves.  
Everything that exists, light and dark, is born of stardust.

The First Peoples had it right: The stars really are our ancestors.

Everything that was, everything that is, everything that will be – is dust.

As Dust, We are all connected  
– rocks and trees, plants and animals, water and air –  
here and to the ends of the universe.

We come from dust, and to the dust we shall return.  
God's earth was here before us, and it will be here after us.  
It is not ours.  
We don't get to pretend it belongs to us,  
or that it is here for us to destroy and use up.

But we do get to explore it.  
We get to enjoy it.  
And we are called to protect it from ourselves.  
When we fail in that duty,  
we are called once more, to repent and to try again.

So today, remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

And as you remember, rejoice,  
and act like we are as special as the stardust from which we were created.  
As we look out into the universe at the countless lights in the night sky,  
Let us remember:  
we are star-children.

Inspired by: <https://Episcopalclimateneeds.com>