

**Sermon, Ash Wed 2021 (The Rev. Sylvia Miller-Mutia)**  
**St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Albuquerque, NM**  
**2/17/2021**

It is a deep delight for me to be preaching today, because I truly believe:  
This day is a gift. This season is a gift. These ashes are a gift.  
It is a deep delight for me to be preaching today, because I truly believe:  
This gift is for YOU.

No matter who you are, this gift is for you.

As we heard the prophet Joel proclaim in the words of our First Reading:

*...sanctify a fast...  
gather the people.  
Sanctify the congregation;  
assemble the aged;  
gather the children,  
even infants at the breast.*

You can never be too old, or too young for this gift:

You can never be too sinful, or too holy for this gift, either.

The gift of this day is for ALL humanity. Young & old. Good & bad.  
Today is a gift for *every* human person.  
But above all, today, I want you to know: this gift is for YOU.

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Ash Wednesday brings the gift of an invitation to let your heart be broken...

*Yet even now, says the Lord,  
return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
rend your hearts and not your clothing.*

If you find yourself looking at our country, our world, our earth, your life, and the ubiquitous evil and the suffering makes your heart ache, today is the day when God offers to take your aching heart in strong, steady hands and break it in two, break it wide open, because sometimes, God knows, a broken heart is the only way for life and love to flow freely again. Yes, it will hurt, but you need not fear this pain, for with this pain comes this promise: After it's been broken in two, God will take your broken, bleeding heart in those same strong, steady hands, and gently, tenderly begin to make it whole again.

Today brings the gift of a broken heart and it brings gifts for the brokenhearted.

Today brings a gift. And that gift is for you.

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Ash Wednesday brings the gift of humility, an invitation to accept your limitations, an invitation to sit in the front row seat and watch as the idols and illusions that control your life begin to crumble.

*The Lord remembers that we are but dust.*

If you ever feel weighed down by the daily reminders that you are not God...If you ever feel crushed by the weighty fact that you cannot--by the force of your own will or work alone-- heal the infirmity, or erase the suffering, or eradicate the evil, or surmount the sin, or solve the problems of your own life, much less those of the world around you...then this Day is a gift for you. This is the day when God makes the earth under us shake, until our battered and time-worn idols of individualism and independence and our glittering illusions of power and control tumble down from their pedestals and are smashed into a hundred billion pieces at our feet...And this is the day when God gently, lovingly, sweeps up that dust and returns it to us as gift.

*The Lord remembers that we are but dust.*

Today brings a gift. And that gift is for you.

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Above all, Ash Wednesday brings the gift of profound connection, of belonging, of grounded-ness.

*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

In times of isolation, this day assures us we're connected, we belong: we belong to the earth, we belong to each other.

The ashes remind us: You are formed of the earth, and to earth you return. Your body is made of earth, you contain all the elements within yourself...the air that fills, the fire that burns, the water that flows. You are made of the very same stuff as the earth itself, and every creature--and every other human who walks this earth before or behind or beside you. The ashes remind you: You are a child of earth, and a child of God, along with every other human person--near and far, past, present, and future, friend and foe. There is nothing in "them" that is not also in "us". There is nothing in "you" that is not also in "me."

*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

Today brings a gift. And that gift is for you.

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Perhaps you are reluctant to accept this gift  
Perhaps you fear that if you take a chance and accept this gift  
That you'll open the gift only to find a box filled with shame

But I promise you  
The Gift of God--including this day--  
Have **nothing** at all to do with shame.  
On the contrary, the Gift of God--including this day--is ALWAYS  
the DESTRUCTION of shame.  
The DEMOLITION of shame.  
The promise of Shame's final and utter DEFEAT.

Shame festers in secret. It thrives on denial. It revels in isolation. It reproduces in tight spaces and behind locked doors.

God's gift is an invitation

To annihilate shame

An invitation

To believe that you--that we--ALWAYS have the power

To reject isolation, and be part of community

To reject denial and accept responsibility

To reject secrets, and speak, out loud, the truth

To break down walls and throw open the doors

God's gift today is the invitation to

utter a dusty, brokenhearted, mortal, earthy, imperfect, "Amen"

And discover that sin and shame and pride and death

Do not define us

God's gift today is the invitation to

utter a dusty, brokenhearted, mortal, earthy, imperfect, "Amen"

And discover

That-- even in the dirt, in the dust, in the ashes--

We are held,

we belong,

we are loved.

We are mortal.

We are alive.

We are free.

Amen.