

## THE IMPASSE OF BREATH AND DUST

Ash Wednesday  
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Isaiah 58:1-12

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Chaucer begins the prologue to the Canterbury Tales with these words:

When in April with sweet showers fall  
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all  
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power  
To generate therein and sire the flower;  
When Zephyr also has, with his sweet breath,  
Quickened again, in every holt and heath,  
The tender shoots and buds, and the young sun  
Into the Ram one half his course has run,  
And many little birds make melody  
That sleep through all the night with open eye  
(So Nature pricks them on to ramp and rage)-  
Then do folk long to go on pilgrimage,  
And palmers to go seeking out strange strands,  
To distant shrines well known in sundry lands.  
And specially from every shire's end  
Of England they to Canterbury wend,  
The holy blessed martyr there to seek  
Who helped them when they lay so ill and weak.<sup>1</sup>

While we are just beginning the “drought of March to the root” and not quite to those sweet showers of April that call us to pilgrimage, we are at that day which marks the start of our annual Lenten journey.

The beginnings of any journey can be times of great excitement as well as times of great anxiety. Getting started isn't always as easy as we hope, and we often don't have the time we need beforehand to prepare. Before we know it, the journey is upon us and we are fretting about whether we actually packed anything we will need and if we brought too much and won't have room to bring anything new back with us. As we situate ourselves today at the start of this year's Lenten travels, we realize this journey is no exception; while we may long for the spiritual renewal the Lenten journey promises each year, we can't help but be leery about our ability to actually live into it.

For some of us, skepticism about traditional ways to structure the journey prevent us from truly entering the pilgrimage. For some of us, past disappointments and our lack of so-called “discipline” caution us to set our expectations of our spiritual selves low. For some of us, there is a resistance to anything rigid, which seems to confine our spirits rather than nourishing them. All of these complications, leave us in a quandary as to whether we should be “giving up” or “taking on” in this season, and so we look to this day, Ash Wednesday – the official mark of the start of Lent – to set the tone and provide guidance for how to start this journey.

We gather then at a threshold. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Lenten season, a time in the church year for renewal, repentance and self-reflection that leads us directly to Easter Sunday. Ash Wednesday, however, is a spiritually challenging threshold to cross. It is a difficult day to start a journey, for the threshold that it puts us at is an intimidating one. We cross through many entryways and exits everyday, but this one gives us pause. It is not only that we cannot see where it will take us; we hesitate because the length of the abyss before us looks just a little wider than the reach of our step. The threshold of Ash Wednesday brings us to a standstill. We begin the Lenten journey with no real idea how to get started and then we come immediately to an impasse.

The daunting width of this threshold has to do with death and grief. We are confronted – and make no mistake, it is a bold confrontation – with the reality that we are mortal and that we are powerless to change that one aspect of being human.

In living, there is the promise of dying. This reminder is indeed the great leveler; there are not any who are exempt. The ashes of this day are a loud reminder that we humans are not able to escape death.

*The United Church of Christ Book of Worship* describes the ancient ritual of imposing ashes as coming widely into practice in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. However, it does note that there is some evidence that the practice originated in Gaul in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when it was first limited to “public penitents doing penance for grave and notorious sins, with whom the clergy tried to comfort and encourage by submitting themselves to the same public humiliation.”<sup>2</sup> Understanding the significance of the imposition of ashes as a sign of comfort and encouragement and connection is one way to make the threshold narrower.

For Ash Wednesday is not a day that is meant to terrify us into spiritual submission, it is day that is meant to allow us to begin our Lenten journey where we should, with our notions of grandeur and control stripped away. The barrenness of this impasse of life and death is no accident, it reminds us that we start our spiritual journey this season with no idea what lies ahead. Journeying into the unknown demands that we seek connections with each other. We must experience this season as a journey that is not complete on this day, but that is only just beginning. We agree to cross the threshold on a leap of faith. The poet Lisel Mueller sums up what is required of us in a brief sentence of her poem, “Imaginary Paintings.” One of the paintings she describes is:

“How I would Paint the Leap of Faith:  
A black cat jumping up three feet  
to reach a three-inch shelf.”<sup>3</sup>

It is not only the willingness to take a leap of faith that will get us across this threshold. The importance of encouragement, comfort, and connection cannot be underestimated as needs on this spiritual journey. Any journey that begins by confronting us with the reality of life and death brings with it the experience of grief. While we rarely talk about it, we are often in the throws of grief, and yet we seldom know how to navigate the paths of this journey. Grief has become a process that happens behind closed doors, often with an impatience that does it little justice.

One of the most uniformly experienced emotions in the grieving process is the isolation and lack of connection with others. A friend once shared with me his intense loneliness after the death of a loved one; looking back on it, he said, there were people he could have turned to if he had trusted in the power of that connection. The difficulty is, in the grief that confronts us in loss and on this day when we are reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return, our instincts are to draw inward and protect ourselves.

We need to fight these instincts; today we need to look around and realize that together we encounter the impasse, together we face death, together we meet the grieving that comes with our losses.

We do not know what lies ahead, and so we cannot prepare ahead of time for what is to come on this Lenten journey. Anymore than a good storyteller reveals the plot of their tale at the beginning, we cannot expect to be prepared for Easter this evening; instead what we prepare for today is the beginning of the journey that takes us to Easter.

One difficulty we do not often take into account when we plan how we will commit and nourish ourselves during Lent is that the journey will shift and change as we experience it. The depth and nature of spiritual needs may change as we travel the journey, and so what is demanded of us today is an ability to trust that we have the tools – the strength, the courage, the patience, the comfort and love of others – to experience and embrace Lent however it comes to us.

Our discipline then may need to shift and change with our needs, one week we may need to take something on, the next we may need to give up something; one day we may need to increase our commitment, the next day we may need to find the steadiness of our pace again. Like Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, we have to go on the pilgrimage to hear the tales, the prologue only sets the stage for what is to come. On our Lenten journey, we have to travel the days to see what is revealed, and it is likely that we will have to adjust our spiritual expectations and commitments to shift with the journey.

For as we live and die we remember that we are dust, and that it was from the dust that the Lord God formed the first human creature like us and breathed into that dust that breathe of life, giving us life and death and a primordial knowledge that our

humanity means being at the impasse of breath and dust. But in trusting in this mystery, we allow ourselves the room to grieve, the room to trust, the room to step across a seemingly too wide abyss knowing that the sum of dust and breath is more than we anticipated.

We stand together now at the impasse of breath and dust; we gaze across the threshold before us, crouching like a black cat.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Canterbury Tales*, translated into Modern English by Neville Coghill, (Penguin Books: New York, revised edition, 1977), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Book of Worship: United Church of Christ*, (United Church of Christ Office for Church Life and Leadership: New York, 1986), p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> Mueller, Lisel, "Imaginary Paintings" in *Alive Together*, (Louisiana State University: Baton Rouge, 1996), p. 24.