

In his book, *Everything Belongs*, Richard Rohr writes:

We seldom go freely into the belly of the beast. ... As a culture, we have to be taught the language of descent. That is the language of religion. It teaches us to enter willingly, trustingly into the dark period of life. These dark periods are good teachers. Religious energy is in the dark questions, seldom in the answers. Answers are the way out, but ... when we look at the questions, we look for the opening to transformation.

It feels to me that we are truly in the “dark period of life.” In many ways, these past two years have been like living in the “belly of the beast.” And now, as we watch a needless, evil, ruthless, devastating war in Ukraine, it feels as though the belly of the beast just seems to grow wider and deeper. We are living in one of those dark times, a dark period we would **not** have freely entered. But, as Rohr says, dark times are good teachers. And, as we come to Ash Wednesday, this first day of Lent, just maybe our Lenten journey is part of the **opening to transformation**.

Today, we again begin that forty-day journey **to** the cross, a journey that will ultimately take us **through** the cross, and a journey that will finally reach the hope, joy, and surprise of Easter. As we embark on this journey, we begin by **remembering**.

We **remember** that we are dust and to dust we shall return. We **remember** the Jesus story. We **remember** this journey we are taking begins with the God of the universe putting on human flesh and entering the world through blood and water, just as each one of us does. And we **remember** this story ends as all human stories must: with death.

This Lenten story, however, which ends as all human stories must, is fundamentally different because the hero of this story, the One who **could** have escaped humanity's fate, this Jesus whom we follow, **intentionally** lays down his life and **chooses** death. He goes freely into the "belly of the beast." Jesus intentionally submits himself to **full** humanity. And, by doing this, death, humanity, indeed Christ's very self, are all transformed. However, it is a transformation that comes by going **through**, and not around, the grave.

Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return. As we follow in the footsteps of Christ, we follow a journey that is about *descent* and not *ascent*. It is about turning around and turning back to God, it is about surrender, it is about letting go, it is about remembering that we are **dust**, it is about becoming nothing. As Richard Rohr says, "When we are nothing,

we are then in a fine position to receive **everything** from God. It is about growing by subtraction much more than by addition.”

Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return. As we think about our lives and reflect upon the past two years, as we look at the horror of what is now happening in Ukraine, we remember and see the immense, unnecessary suffering and death of so many, whether by Covid-19 or by unjustifiable war. We cannot but be reminded of **our** own mortality, reminded of the fragile nature of life, and reminded that we truly are dust. **All** that we have worked for and **all** that we have done **will** someday be as nothing, it will someday be as dust. And the **good** news of this Ash Wednesday is this: **God has gone there with us**. God intentionally entered this world as Emmanuel, God with us; and, in the person of Jesus, entered the “belly of the beast.” God’s answer to the suffering in this world was to put on flesh and blood and **hold** the suffering itself. God’s answer was to put on human feet, walk *into* the suffering, and walk *through* it. And, by walking *through* it, allow it to shape, change, and transform life itself. For those of us who follow Jesus, **we are called to do the same**. Richard Rohr suggests, this is the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. He writes, “So much is happening on earth that cannot be fixed or

explained, but **it can be felt and suffered. I think a Christian is one who, along with Jesus, agrees to feel, to suffer the pain of the world.**” As I think about Rohr’s words, I believe we are living in a time when we are called to do just that – feel and suffer the pain of the world, as difficult as that may be. And, this is a **holy** form of suffering.

As we begin this journey *to* the cross, *through* the cross, and then finally on to Easter, the Paschal mystery **is** the mystery of transformation ***in and through the ashes***. If Lent is the somber reminder of our human condition, then **Easter** declares that there is **hope**, but that hope lies **not** in escaping our humanity but in journeying **through** it. As we live in the darkness of this moment, this “belly of the beast,” easy and trite answers to the questions we ask regarding suffering and pain may seem to provide a way *out* of the dark, but they are **not** the way *into* transformation.

Transformation requires that we walk *into*, that we walk *through*. Far too often, when we experience dark times, we try to live in denial. Or we try to change, master, or manipulate events and situations so that we can avoid changing **ourselves**, avoid **being** changed. Rohr suggests, “We must learn to stay with the pain of life, **without** answers, **without** conclusions, and some days even **without** meaning. That is the path, the perilous dark

path of true **prayer**.” Quite frankly, when we look at tonight’s gospel reading, that is the way of life and path of prayer Jesus suggests we take. As a community of Faith, we have been living that over the past two years and we continue to live that path of prayer in the present time. We have been carrying and continue to carry the suffering of others. You see, **two** primary paths of transformation **are** pain and suffering. And, when I say that I must remind you that it is NOT that God desires any of us to suffer. Suffering is simply an aspect of being human. Rachel Held Evans once said, “Healing comes when we enter into one another’s pain, anoint it as **holy**, and stick around no matter the outcome.”

As we continue life together as a community of Faith, we continue to anoint each other’s pain as **holy**. You see, our **neighbor’s** suffering is holy, the horrific suffering of our friends in Ukraine is holy, and **our** suffering is holy. And it is **NOT** holy because God delights in suffering, NO. It is holy because **God came and joined us within it**. The experience of the suffering of so many is holy in the same way the bread and wine we share tonight is holy. It is holy because, through incarnation, **Christ comes and meets us there**.

Today, we **remember** that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

We **remember** that we are mortal. We **remember** that we are human, and we **remember** that our lives are fragile. However, we also **remember** that **being human is a holy thing**. Our very *mortality* is a holy thing. We have been made holy by the One who came, the One who died, and the One who **rose again**. So, as we begin this Lenten journey, we **choose** to willingly travel that road to the cross, because it **is** the road that leads through the cross to transformation, to resurrection, and being made new. It is truly the way of **hope**. God is present, in our midst, and God is blessing this holy journey.