

# Remember Our Dust

BY ELIZABETH EVANS HAGAN

Lent is an invitation to live with the dust of our humanity—of broken relationships, of spiritual doubts, of fears about the future—to not spend all our energy trying to hide it or rid ourselves of it, but to invite dust into our homes for this season and see what we can learn.

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**A**fter a recent vacation, I gleefully walked in the door of my house, so excited to be home after a long trip. I dreamed of clean clothes, putting my feet up on the coffee table, and spending the night relaxing on our comfy couch. First thing, I took my shoes off my tired feet and went straight for the refrigerator to look for a cold drink. Within seconds, though, I found the bottom of my white socks quickly turning a dark shade of grey. As my husband and I began to survey the landscape, from the stove top in the kitchen, to the bathroom countertops, to the filth on the hardwood floors, it was clear: dust was everywhere. No corner, nook, or cranny was untouched from this unwanted film. We clearly had a mess on our hands, literally. This situation was not what my husband and I expected when we had exclaimed to each other just a few hours earlier on the plane, “I can’t wait to get home.”

We should not have been surprised, though. Before we left, we had handed over the keys to our home and more money than I would have liked to a contractor with plans to turn our basement into an in-law suite. “We’ll be doing demolition while you’re gone, pulling down the dry wall and pulling up the floors,” he had told us. I spent the week prior to vacation making preparations for his arrival, removing boxes we had not touched in years from the big open space. So, of course, returning home, I expected change. I expected a mess, even. But, in the basement—not upstairs too!

Being new to the home improvement world, I had no idea what everyone who has lived in a construction zone knows to be true: there is no such

thing as dust that can be contained. When demolition happens in one part of your house, the rest of your house is affected too. This is especially true if you have central heat or air and want to not freeze or burn up during the process. By turning on the heating/air conditioning unit—even if you have vent covers in the construction zone—you will blow dust throughout your entire house. For as long as your construction progress lasts, so does your relationship with dust. And in our case it lasted sixty days.



Several years ago I attended a lectionary planning retreat for clergy. We discussed theme ideas for upcoming liturgical seasons with hopes of improving the creativity in one another's preaching. When we got to Lent, a presenter was energized by the theme of "Remember Your Dust"—playing off of the phrase in Ash Wednesday services: "remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return." She explained it might be woven into narrative-based preaching, drawing upon characters from the lectionary readings for Lent such as Moses, David, Peter, and of course Jesus. She suggested the theme would encourage our congregation to remember their sinfulness without hitting them over the head with it. Her enthusiasm was contagious. Most of my colleagues were ready to borrow her idea.

But I wasn't so sure. Yes, of course, there is that whole "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" thing, but wouldn't it be better to do something else—like one of those variations on the "seven deadly sins," or "journeying with Jesus to the cross," or the traditional "last seven words of Jesus" themes? How would "remembering our dust" serve any purpose during Lent? That year for Lent, I went my own way and preached through gospel lections and exhorted my congregation to greater discipleship practices like prayer, fasting, sacrificial giving, and the like. Congregation members came up regularly and asked, "How long till we get to Easter?"—which is another way of saying, "We don't get it, Pastor!" Looking back now, I realize that talking about our relationship with dust is not a bad thing. Maybe, just maybe, this is what we need to hear more about during the Lenten season.

It is something we all have experience with—the dust of our lives. We miss the mark of God's best for us when we believe the illusion that our dustiness is only in part of us. Our lives are not in fact as shiny clean as we like to think they are. Our lives are not free of irritants as much as we like to think they are. Our lives are not ours to control as much as we like to think they are. Sometimes our dust literally takes over our whole lives, like it does when we redo our homes. Spiritually, we cannot escape it.

Maybe we need to do a better job of telling this story. Not that we are sinners in the hands of an angry God—as some of us have been taught in our upbringings. Not that Lent calls us into a lifestyle of "doing better" as some preachers are tempted to offer up every year. And not that Lent is

about engaging in some special discipline like giving up television or chocolate that makes us better Christians than all the rest.

Rather, Lent is an invitation to live honestly with our dust – to not spend all our energy trying to hide it, but to acknowledge the dust in our homes for this season and see what we can learn.



Such a relationship with Lent must begin with those of us who are pastors. If we expect our congregations to “remember their dust,” we must first be leaders who are willing to remember ours as well.

I recently spoke to a small group Bible study in a different city than the one in which I pastor. All the members of this small group were members of the same church, and the group was facilitated by a lay leader who was not on staff at the church. It seemed a good time for honesty about their church experience, especially with my coming in as an outsider. As I began to ask questions about what types of ministries and programs this group needed to feel more supported in their faith journey, it was clear: all said they needed to see more authenticity from the pulpit. No, not more classes on this or that. Not more opportunities for mission trips. And not even more lively music in worship.

Rather, “We need to know that pastors struggle too,” they said. “We need to know that a pastor’s journey includes times of grief, doubt, questions, and reflection that has nothing to do with the next sermon.”

Being in the clergy family myself, I was a bit taken aback by their words. Is this what most congregation members feel about their pastor? Do they not know that we struggle? Do they not know that there are days when we wake up on Sunday morning with feelings of complete unworthiness to stand in the pulpit? Do they not know that our lives are filled with as much dust of our humanity – of broken relationships, of spiritual doubts, of fears about the future – as theirs?

“Why do you think that is?” I asked.

“Because it would help us feel like we could be the kind of Christian who makes mistakes and feels lost more times than not. It would help us feel less lonely in the pews on Sunday mornings.”

As I later reflected on these words and talked with others about them, I realized that this was not an isolated experience. So many worshippers feel the same way and are longing for their pastors to give them permission to be real, to be a little dustier than they are used to being in church.

So, if this is true, what a great time it is this Lent for us to make plans to remember our dust; to take real Sabbath from our ministerial titles, robes, and collars. I know one pastor of a big steeple church, for example, who asked her church leadership for the entire season of Lent off because she knew how much she needed soul rest. And to her surprise, the answer was yes.

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Now, not all of us may get such a gift, but we can live into Lent. To rest in the knowledge of God's love for us no matter what mistakes we have made. To allow God's blessings, which have no correlation to how successful we have been, to flow into us. To practice Lent this year by taking time to breathe, take a step back from our successes and failures, and to remember our dust.

In doing so, we might just find we have greater acceptance for our dwelling place, its dust and all.

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