"Dust of Heaven"
Isaiah 58.1–12 & Matthew 6.1–6 and 16–21
The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 25 February 2009

This service is one of the most meaningful for me in the church year. And part of the reason is because it involves physical touch. When Sharon and I take a smudge of palm ash and olive oil and put it on your forehead, there is a tactile sense of reaching out to you and touching you physically. And we leave a visible mark on you.

And there is a sense – a profound sense – of metaphysical connection that accompanies this simple, liturgical movement. We look into your eyes and say, "From dust you come, to dust you shall return." It brings up a lot of feelings for me when I look into the eyes of a child and say those words that presage the death at the end of this young life. And it is difficult to look into the eyes of people in the midst of health struggles and offer those same words, knowing that they may not be with us next year. And it can be painful for those who have recently lost a loved one. But, these are words that tie each one of us together. Our bodies are of the earth, and they shall return to the earth. All of us are bound together by the journey of life, death, and life beyond death.

Yes, our bodies are made of the stuff of the earth: ashes and clay, carbon and nitrogen. Actually, we're more oxygen than anything else: about 60% of our mass. And even though the oxygen is bound into compounds with other chemicals, I can't help feeling that oxygen, which is a gas at room temperature, gives us a certain ethereal quality.

A couple of years ago at the Denver Museum of Science and Nature, I learned that we are literally made of stardust. Our wonderful human bodies are made of matter that once was a star. Think about that and listen to these ancient words:

"The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven." Those words were written by Paul the apostle to the church in Corinth nearly 2,000 years ago.[1]

We humans are a fascinating, frustrating blend of stardust and clay…the heights and depths of all we know…the ridiculous and the sublime. And God loves and accepts us for exactly what and who we are.

It is in that sense of humility – acknowledging our curious blend of clay and stardust – that we come to relationship with God and this season of prayer during which we attempt to deepen our relationship with the God who always beckons us and says, "yes" to our approach.

I can't imagine that any of us came here tonight so that we'd look pious when we depart from church with a smudge of ash on our forehead. But it is a visible reminder to each of us, ourselves, that we are beginning a 40-day pilgrimage. It is an internal journey, but one that we can do in the company of supportive friends. At times during this season, I hope that each of us will come into that space of praying to God privately, and that also will relate to God in the spirit of community as well.

A few days ago, I read, "Faith is not something you have; it is something you do."[2] Let's **do** faith together in this season!

My wish for you as we walk together into our Lenten pilgrimage is that your journey will be rich in blessing, meaning, and faith. Amen.

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[1] I Corinthians 15.47–49
[2] Christian Wiman in *The Christian Century,* Feb. 24, 2009.

Benediction
in honor of – and with borrowings from – John O'Donohue

During the 40 days of this Lenten journey,
May you be blessed.
May you realize that God will accompany you, and sees you with great joy.
May times of prayer be like an oasis for you, knowing that your time of intention is sacred.
May your senses always enable you to celebrate the universe and the mystery and
possibilities of God's presence – and your presence.
And as you journey through Lent, may Christ accompany you and bless you richly.
Amen.