

We are on the journey from Ashes to Fire. We prepare for Easter with the Forty Days of Lent. And after Easter Sunday, we continue the celebration for 50 days until the Day of Pentecost.

Ashes to Fire. We go on a journey every year. The ashes of Ash Wednesday begin that journey. The journey ends thirteen and a half weeks later with the fire of Pentecost.

Now this is a reversal of the normal order of things. You usually begin with fire and end up with ashes. Ashes are the by-product of fire.

And to be fair, the ashes that are used on Ash Wednesday traditionally come from palms that were used on the previous Palm Sunday. So in reality, we start with fire, and then ashes, and then a new kind of fire.

But that's the way it is in the physical universe. On this day every year, we say, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." We are made of dust. We are constructed of atoms just like all other matter. About 99% of our bodies are made up of six elements: oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus. Hydrogen is the most abundant element in the universe and has been around for almost the entire history of the universe.<sup>1</sup> The other elements that make up the majority of our bodies were formed much later in stars which have now been long dead. As the astrophysicists are fond of saying, we are made of stardust.

So the elements in our bodies were formed in the fires of early stars, and we are made of their ashes. God has used the ashes of dead stars to bring forth our world. And God has used the ashes of dead stars to bring forth living creatures in our world, including us.

We start with fire, and then ashes, and then a new kind of fire. From the fire of ancient stars to dead stardust to the spark of new life. We live because of the death of these ancient stars.

Part of the spiritual journey of Lent is a contemplation of this same pattern, and a participation in this same pattern.

We journey from life, to death, to new life.

That is the pattern we remember, that is the pattern we celebrate in the great cycle of Lent and Easter. From ashes to agony to crucifixion to resurrection.

We remember Jesus moving from life to death to new life.

And we participate in that same pattern. We share in his death so that we may share in his life. Dying to self. Dying in the waters of baptism. Being raised to new life. Being made more and more like him.

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<sup>1</sup> Forming within a mere 300,000 to 400,000 years after the Big Bang, which means it's been around for about 99.997% of the history of the universe.

Remember that you are dust. Stars died so that you might exist.

Remember that you are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus died, so that you may have new life.

As we will pray in a few moments,

Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth: Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence, that we may remember that it is only by *your gracious gift* that we are given everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.