

The dustiest place I've ever been is Omak Washington. My mom's sister Jo and her family lived there when I was growing up.

Compared to the shores of Puget Sound where I was from, Eastern Washington was a completely different world. It was hot, dry and dusty.

My family lived just off the highway that leads into town on about a quarter of an acre. There were barren brown fields behind their house that led up to a bluff that overlooked the Okanogan River and the Rodeo fairgrounds. Every August, actual cowboys and Indians gathered for the rodeo called the Omak Stampede.

A few miles from my aunt's house in a low field just west of the river, the Colville Confederation of Tribes set up a teepee town for their annual pow wow.

The main attraction of the rodeo was and still is called the Suicide Race, so called for the danger and risk the race involved.

The dirt road behind my aunt's house led to the top of the race course, a very steep 100 yard embankment down to the river.

Riders and their horses start on the road about 50 feet from the embankment, they race toward the cliff and plunge down the hill. When they reach the bottom, they jump their horses into the river, swim across and race another 500 yards into the rodeo arena.

As the summer wears on and the heat beats down on the ground, the dirt on the hillside becomes softer and softer and the ground is churned into a fine powdery dust. When the horses and riders descend, the horses sink in about a foot deep and a huge cloud of dust follows in their wake.

The race has been going on now since the 1930's and animal rights activists have been trying to shut it down for about half as long. But it's a tradition that has its roots in Native American endurance racing and has spiritual significance for the members of the Colville tribes, who see it as a right of passage and a sign of bravery and self sacrifice.

Before they race, the riders fast and pray in a sweat lodge. The four days of racing begin with a traditional song to bless the horses and riders. Eagle feathers are attached to the horses' mane to symbolize the spirit that travels from one world to another.

The Colville tribes have suffered a great deal of displacement and persecution in the last few centuries, They've been forced off their native lands. They suffered the loss of the salmon runs from the building of dams, their children were forced to attend boarding schools in an effort to erase their culture.

In our time they are continually reaching back into the lives of their ancestors to reclaim their cultural heritage and identity. For them the pow wow and the race is more than an event, but a way to hand down traditions and to honor their ancestors.

This is what ritual does for a community; it helps us to remember who we are.

As we smear the dust on our foreheads, we participate in a tradition that spans centuries, it is a ritual that is meant to remind us that our lives will end in the very earth God created. It is an act of remembrance that in the beginning, God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed the breath of life into him to make him a living being.

What makes this ritual authentic and meaningful to you?

Our gospel seems to suggest we should not go out in public wearing our ashes, lest we be tempted to congratulate ourselves on our piety.

So then how do we respond? Do the ashes on our foreheads create a dilemma? As you go out from here, do you wipe them away in fear of looking pious?

If you do leave them on, its easy to forget they are there, you may be startled to see them there later on this evening as you look in the mirror.

It's so easy to forget our own mortality, to dismiss our sinfulness, but this ritual is a physical reminder of the gravity of our human condition. We are dust, and to dust we will return.

I think its possible that many people may wonder about the usefulness of pausing to dwell on death and sin, some may find it distasteful and morbid, but as Christians, this day is balanced in the hope that is symbolized in the shape of the ashes on our foreheads. The symbol of the cross connects our mortality, our human sinfulness with the promise that, we are saved by God's mercy and grace. Again and again we will fail, and again and again, God loves us and transforms us.

The shape of the mark on our foreheads today is the same shape that we were marked with in Holy Baptism by sacred oil, the mark that seals us, as Christ's own forever. This is the same oil that we mix with the burned palm fronds from last Palm Sunday, the same oil we use to anoint the sick and dying, as if to remind us that in the totality of our lives from the very beginning to the very end, we belong to God.

This is another truth that is easy to forget, even Isaiah sings about the fear that God will not respond, to his prayers and fasting, that he will be forgotten or unworthy of God's response.

God sings in return that authentic spiritual practice leads to the healing of the world. Our rituals in and of themselves are meaningless, but when they are authentic and heartfelt, they loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free. The fruit of Christian humility leads to sharing bread with the hungry, and bringing the homeless poor into your houses, to covering the naked and lost, and of making ourselves seen to our kin.

This is the invitation of the gospel, to lean into Lent with prayer and contemplation to deepen our spiritual lives so that we might participate more fully in the healing of ourselves, our community and our world. To remind us of our sinfulness also serves to remind us of the power and transformation of God's forgiveness.

Jesus says to "fast, give and pray" because these actions refocus our attention on what is true. Fasting can lead to compassion for those who are hungry and can heighten our sense of hunger for God. Giving reminds us that all we have is not earned by our own power, but is given as a gift from our Creator. Quiet private prayer allows room for the Spirit of God to move within us, to guide and heal us as we journey through life.

We don't earn our spiritual treasure by performing for God but in practicing our faith authentically and humbly and then...

then your light shall rise in the darkness

and your gloom be like the noonday.

¹¹ The LORD will guide you continually,

and satisfy your needs in parched places,

and make your bones strong;

and you shall be like a watered garden,

like a spring of water,

whose waters never fail.

¹² Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;

you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;

you shall be called the repairer of the breach,

the restorer of streets to live in.

your light will shine out of the darkness

As we begin this Lenten journey that will end with the Easter light of Christ coming into the world, may we pray and fast and give in the knowledge of the love of Christ and with the promise of that redemptive love.

Rev. Carol Rodin

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