

This meditation is from Nathan D. Mitchell, from the booklet, *Daybreaks: Daily Reflections for Lent and Easter* (by Liguori Publications).

An Ash Wednesday Reflection

Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust

You see them everywhere today: smudged on the foreheads of chirping school kids, etched above the eyes of young women walking to work, sprinkled on silver-haired seniors. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust”—a haunting, familiar phrase first found in the burial service of the *English Book of Common Prayer*—reminds us of a truth most of us prefer not to ponder: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). After all, what are dust and ashes but dirt, *matter out of place*, evidence that things aren’t what (or where) they should be, harsh reminders that our own lives will drift away like smoke? Yet Abraham, our forebear in faith, saw his dust-and-ashes condition as cause for celebration. In a story that blends humor and horror, he probes the wideness of God’s mercy, boldly bargaining with the Lord to spare the “cities of the plain” (Genesis 18:23–33). “Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city...forty-five...forty...thirty...twenty...ten...?” Brazen in his belief that mercy trumps vengeance, Abraham discovers that God’s passion to forgive surpasses every human plan to destroy.

Paradoxically, then, the ashes that signal our mortality, our world’s extinction, and our sore need for repentance (what the Gospel calls “conversion”) also symbolize God’s choice to forgive *everybody everything*. This was the unimaginable secret Abraham learned when bargaining with God. Our destiny isn’t destruction but dancing. God seeks not the sinner’s death but the heart’s return: not ashes to dust but ashes to *Easter*.