

A Time to Ponder Our False Selves

Lent's invitation to take an honest look at who we are | ELLEN M. KOGSTAD

Back in Advent the Apostle Peter asked a question that has been following me ever since. It wasn't really a formal question with an official punctuation mark. It was a phrase hidden in the body of a run-on sentence. He asked, "What sort of persons ought you to be...?" (2 Peter 3:11). It's also a great Lenten question as we encounter the ever-present shadow side of our lives.

Ash Wednesday's liturgy is blunt: to dust you will return. I need this annual reminder that one day I will be no more. It helps me keep the end in mind. After the debacle in the Garden, God is direct with Adam: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). What a dramatic free fall from thinking it possible to be like God to the humiliation of that pronouncement.

I am challenged by Joan Chittister's description of this sacred day in *The Liturgical Year*: "Ash Wednesday, an echo of the Hebrew Testament's ancient call to sackcloth and ashes, is a continuing cry across the centuries that life is transient, that change is urgent. We don't have enough time to waste time on nothingness. We need to repent our dillydallying on the road to God. We need to regret the time we've spent playing with dangerous distractions and empty diversions along the way. We need to repent of our senseless excesses and

our excursions into sin, our breaches of justice, our failures of honesty, our estrangement from God, our savoring of excess, our absorbing self-gratifications, one infantile addiction, one creature craving another. We need to get back in touch with our souls."

Those are strong words, and true ones. I wonder if the movement from wasting time on nothingness to soulful living passes through the fires of regret and repentance. If so, this would be the time. The church year gives us almost seven weeks to ponder our false selves.

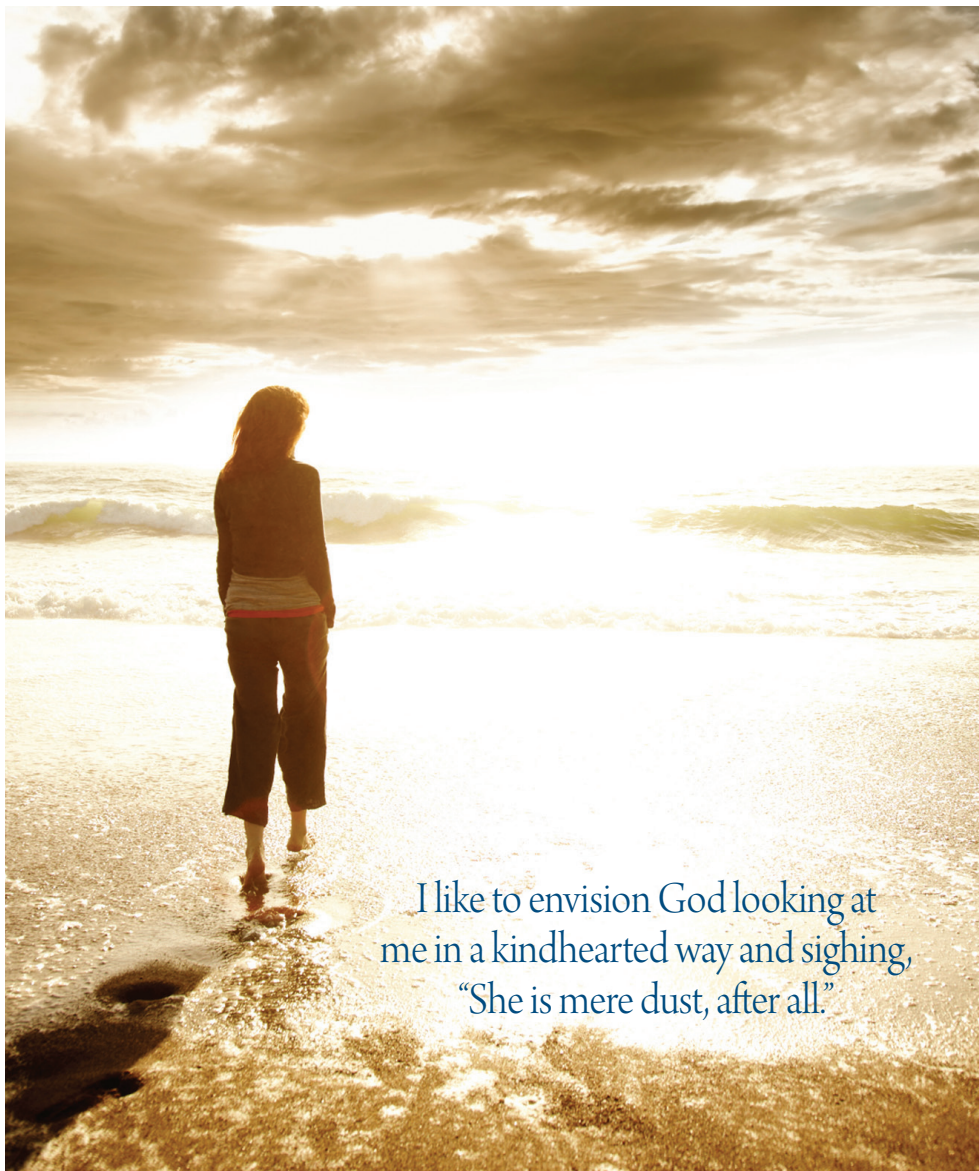
There is a twist to the theme of dust that comforts me, however. David writes, "For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust" (Psalm 103:14). David's gentle reminder that God really understands how fragile we are, how difficult it is to live well, lessens some of the guilt and anxiety about doing life "just right." I like to envision God looking at me in a kindhearted way and sighing, "She is mere dust, after all." Perhaps being mere dust is also our freedom. We truly cannot be like God. And so without fear we can pray boldly, "Search me, O God." Allowing God to search us may be what the practice of giving up something in Lent is all about.

One year among both my friends and the people I work with in spiritual direction, I heard the same phrase

repeated at least half a dozen times, "I'm giving up alcohol for Lent."

Not one of these individuals was at a tipping point with spirits, yet each one believed God was suggesting a shift in their drinking habits. The practice of giving something up for Lent, I believe, targets our understated attachments. Even good church folk can be dominated by money, anger, cookies, web surfing, shame, TV, jealousy, shopping, gossip, pride, Facebook, exercise, coffee, travel, Pepsi (a personal challenge)—fill in your personal hook. Most of us know our hooks; there is little need for intense soul searching. This attitude, habit, or activity becomes the chosen fast. It is remarkable to watch what God can do in forty days when we're open to change.

Author and theologian Laurence Hull Stookey writes, "Lenten disciplines are not temporary deletions or additions but spiritual exercises that permanently alter us. Instead of forbidding chocolate or adding a Bible reading for six-and-a-half weeks, Lenten disciplines drive deeply into the religious psyche by asking questions such as these: What progress am I making in sharing gladly what I have with others, particularly with the stranger and the poor? What attitudes do I convey to those who irritate me? How can awareness of my own need of God's grace enable me to be more



I like to envision God looking at me in a kindhearted way and sighing, “She is mere dust, after all.”

gracious to them? How has my sense of interconnectedness in corporate worship grown of late, and how can I move ahead in appreciating the contributions and needs of other members in the congregation to which I belong? Can I redistribute my long-range personal budget in order to have more money to give away? When I hear someone being unjustly maligned, do I speak up to correct the record, or am I a silent accomplice? How can I more effectively and consistently support legislation and social programs that help the disadvantaged rather than hurt them? In devotional acts of prayer and reading, am I increasing my attention span and discovering new ways of listening rather than of talking, of giving thanks rather than of complaining?”

Psalm 78 has become a favorite poem of mine. I enjoy its condensed versions of Old Testament stories. What I like even more is the psalm-

ist’s running commentary: “In spite of all this they still sinned; they did not believe in his wonders.... When he killed them, they sought for him; they repented and sought God earnestly. They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God their redeemer. But they flattered him with their mouths; they lied to him with their tongues” (vv. 32-36). Once again there is a hint at why God keeps putting up with their lukewarm dedication: “He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not come again” (v. 39).

Even in our weakness, our dustiness, God keeps showing up. Over and over again we are extended mercy. Lent invites us to reconsider the way things are. The ashes are placed on our foreheads in the shape of the cross, a symbol of horror for the Son of God, yet our hope. Each of us can write a psalm of our lives modeled on Psalm 78 highlighting major

events but, more important, noting our own back-and-forth relationship with God. A few lines might read:

In 2012 I shopped at no malls nor Internet stores because God asked me not to. I listened. The big brown truck stopped next door. Something new to watch or wear or read, I wish. Maybe someone else needs what I want. I’ll send the money to the shelter, because God asked me to.

Giving up shopping creates sensitivity to others who are in need. Both parties, as Stookey suggests, are dependent on the mercy of God.

As American Christians, we have the option to take or leave Lent. If someone were grading us on a bell curve, perhaps many of us would come out all right. We read the Bible and pray regularly. We are church members and attenders. We tithe or at least donate to charity. We are honest employees. For followers of Jesus, however, the spiritual practice of Lent is essential. These days of introspection provide the opportunity for some of the best soul formation of the entire year. Jesus takes this faith journey to a whole new level: do not fear, only believe; whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all; be at peace with one another; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me; whenever you stand praying, forgive.

Thus we return to Peter’s question, “What sort of persons ought you to be?” Believing that God is trustworthy, knowing that God knows we are made from dust, we transform Peter’s words into a prayer, “O God, what sort of person do you want me to be now?” As we walk with Jesus to Gethsemane, then Golgotha, our ears and eyes are open, our hearts receptive to the answers that will come. ■

Ellen M. Kogstad is the director of the C. John Weberg Center for Spiritual Direction at North Park Theological Seminary. She is also the director of spiritual formation at New Moms, Inc.