

FELLOWSHIP  
*of* PRAYER



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LENTEN SEASON 2012

*by*

MARYANN MCKIBBEN DANA



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## *About the Author*

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Dear Reader:

As a child, I loved going through my grandparents' encyclopedias. A favorite section was on the human body, with intricate, full-color diagrams of the circulatory system, muscles, nerves. Each system was illustrated on its own clear plastic page, so you could view it on its own, or you could lay them on top of each other—organs on top of arteries on top of bones. And then there was the skin that covered everything underneath it—an entire universe, encased in human flesh, fearfully and wonderfully made.

Life feels like this—layers upon layers laid on top of each other. There are carpools and dinners with friends, oil changes and books due at the library. There are friends in the hospital, bills to pay, tensions with a family member, a presidential election looming, a never-ending onslaught of news and punditry. There's that guy on the park bench, his worldly possessions crammed in a purloined grocery cart. There's the sweet little girl in your son's fifth grade class who just arrived in the U.S. and speaks no English. There's the neighbor who gets on your last nerve. There's the church committee meeting.

Life goes on as usual between February 22 and April 8, but with a new layer: the season of Lent. For some of us, Lent means intentional scripture reading, or giving up an indulgence through Easter, or an increased commitment to prayer, or daily reading of the book you now hold in your hands. But our life of faith is not just a set of tasks like any other. It is the circulatory system, our lifeblood, the heart that pumps life into us and keeps us going. Or perhaps it's the nervous system, the center of feeling and awareness. Or perhaps it's the skin—the flesh that enfolds everything else we do.

Lent can be all of these things, and more, if we give ourselves fully to the season, its themes, and its practices. Take a deep breath, and let us begin.

*MaryAnn McKibben Dana*



ASH WEDNESDAY • FEB 22

## *We Are Dust*

Read Psalm 51.

*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.*

Tonight, many of us will attend worship services in which we receive ashes on the forehead along with the stark words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” In a death-denying culture, it is one of the more radical things we do. Anthony Robinson, a pastor and writer, served a congregation that decided to have an Ash Wednesday service for the first time, followed by a community concert. When Robinson looked out on the crowd that night, his sermon about sin and brokenness clutched in his hands, he realized that many people in the sanctuary were from the greater community. How would they react to an extended time of confession? Would the imposition of ashes feel weird or punitive?

The next day he was walking with his wife in a sketchy neighborhood in town—lots of folks sporting tattoos and piercings. A young woman with both of these, plus wild multi-colored hair, stopped him. “You’re that pastor from last night, aren’t you? What you did, and what you said—it was so meaningful. It was awesome.”

*We are dust, and to dust we shall return.* We are dust, all of us—the pastor and the wild-haired young woman, and the toddler and the nonagenarian. Our time is short upon this earth. Only God endures forever. In the meantime, what are we living for? What are we willing to give ourselves to? We long to belong to something larger than ourselves. But what is that something? The ashes, marking us with the cross, proclaim the answer. We belong to God. Even in our frailty and finitude, a good and powerful God loves us. That is the gospel message of Lent.

*Dear God, help me to live in hope this Lent. I am your child. Amen.*

THUR • FEB 23

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## *From the Ashes*

Read Isaiah 43:18-19.

*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing.*

Her name was Isabella Baumfree, but most of us know her by the name she chose for herself, a free woman: Sojourner Truth. A gifted preacher and activist for abolitionism and women's rights, she aroused controversy whenever she spoke. On one occasion, when she was greeted by hissing and booing, she responded, "You may hiss as much as you please, but women will get their rights anyway. You can't stop us, neither."

One day, while preparing to speak in Indiana, word came that someone had threatened to burn down the building if she spoke there. Sojourner said, "Then I will speak upon the ashes."

The message is clear: nothing would stop Sojourner Truth—not hatred, not intimidation, and certainly not a lit match touching dry wooden beams. If necessary, she would stand tall on the charred remains of that building, a living testimony that oppression and ugliness are not the final word. Liberation, beauty, truth—these things prevail.

Ashes are a reminder of our mortality, to be sure, but they are more than that. They are a reminder that life can erupt from death. God's creation testifies to this again and again, as forests are decimated by fire, only to burst with green in seasons to come. Lent testifies to this too.

*You are about to do a new thing, powerful God. Give me eyes to see it, and the words to testify to what I see.*

## *The Prayer Heard 'Round the World*

Read Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21.

*"Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret."*

She tucked one leg underneath her as she rocked on the porch swing. She smiled, her face alive with crinkles of joy and age. Her improbable words were sinking into my skull.

The woman, a Dominican nun who runs a retreat center in rural Georgia, had been talking about the practice of centering prayer, which is a deep, silent time of contemplation and listening for God. Practitioners recommend 20 minutes, twice a day. It's serious stuff.

My friend said, "There is a movement underway as more and more people learn about and practice centering prayer. The interest is growing. And we believe that if enough people take part in it, the whole world will change. We believe this kind of prayer can change the world."

I believe; help my unbelief. I want desperately for her words to be true. I long to believe that millions of people at prayer, listening daily for God, can change things—that a warring people will cease their fighting, that generosity will prevail in a world that's often stingy and small. But my faith is weak sometimes.

I'm puzzled by Jesus' words on prayer. Many mainline Christians have distorted this verse to mean that we should never show any evidence of our faith in Jesus. But aren't we supposed to witness? I'm not talking about showiness; I'm talking about letting our light shine.

But maybe Jesus knew that even a quiet prayer could be subversive, that the practices of Christian didn't need to be flashy in order to change the world. Maybe Jesus knew that the transformation of individual hearts would transform the world.

Maybe if the 2 billion Christians in the world really did all pray in their closets, the world would shift on its spiritual axis.

*God, help me learn to pray like I really mean it.*

## Putting the “Wild” in Wilderness

Read Mark 1:9-13.

*He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

Fresh from his baptism, still waterlogged from the Jordan, Jesus is thrust into the wilderness for a time of preparation and testing. Mark doesn't give us many details—there is no biblical repartee between Jesus and Satan here as in Matthew and Luke—but what we do get is vivid. Angels attend to Jesus. And he is “with the wild beasts.”

A dear friend of mine, a college chaplain in Texas, is my go-to phone call when I am faced with a great challenge or crisis. Sometimes she will close our conversation by saying, “May the wild beasts minister to you.” She knows that this is a misreading of the text—after all, the angels do the ministering, not the animals. And yet it's an intriguing and faithful misreading. Angels have a soft, comforting image in our culture (though not always in scripture). We picture them in flawless white robes and perfect hair, like Legolas, the blond elf from *Lord of the Rings*. But sometimes a gentle, well-coiffed angel doesn't cut it. Sometimes we need the heavy artillery, spiritually speaking. When we're in the fight of our lives, we need courage and strength. We need a sidewinder, sent from God, on our side. Or a scorpion.

What does it mean that the wild beasts were with Jesus? Perhaps their sheer wildness was an inspiration to him. Their lack of tameness gave him the strength he needed to go *mano a mano* with the Adversary, who was relentless in his struggle to divert, distract or seduce Jesus away from his mission.

Or perhaps the wild beasts were tame in comparison with Jesus, the Son of God who confounds our expectations, who is always surprising us.

*O God of the wilderness, as I go about my day, help me to look for you in the untamed moments. Amen.*