

**Ash Wednesday**  
**6 February 2008**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

O the dragons are gonna fly tonight  
They're circling low and inside tonight  
It's another round in the losing fight

The seasons come and bring no relief  
Time is a brutal but a careless thief  
Who takes our lot but leaves the grief

The mournful voice of Emmy Lou Harris keens these words in her song, "The Pearl." The CD on which it is found collects dust on my shelf. I'd not listened to it in years, but Emmy Lou's words sprung up in my mind effortlessly the first time that I, dressed for the burial office in the glorious white vestments of Resurrection, was handed a heavy, solid and nondescript black box carrying the ashes of one I had known and to whom I had ministered. When I set the box down, I realized immediately that I had ash on my hands. The box was black on purpose, to mask the fact that the process of transferring ashes from the crematory to their container leaves a residue. Cremation is not pristine and sterile. It, like life, is messy. The ash left my hands smudged, and the contrast between the glitter of my vestments and the stark reality of the ashes dredged up Emmy Lou Harris' words: The dragons fly relentlessly, and in the end they leave but ashes.

Author Anne Lamott lost her best friend to cancer. She shares this reflection:

I tossed a handful of Pammy's [ashes] into the water way out past the Golden Gate Bridge during the day, with her husband and family.... I was able to see...the deeply contradictory nature of ashes—that they are both so heavy and so light. They're impossible to let go of entirely. They stick to things, to your fingers, your sweater. I licked my friend's ashes off my hand, to taste them, to taste her, to taste what was left after all that was clean and alive had been consumed, burned away. They tasted metallic, and they blew every which way. We tried to strew them off the side of the boat romantically, with seals barking from the rocks on shore, under a true-blue sky, but they would not cooperate. [Ashes] rarely will. It's frustrating if you are hoping to have a happy ending, or at least a little closure, a movie moment when you toss them into the air and they flutter and disperse. They don't. They cling, they haunt. They get in your hair, in your eyes, in your clothes.<sup>1</sup>

Our lives on this plain are brief, and we—like all those who have come before us—will be but ashes. In our broken world, it is all too easy to nod in cadence with Emmy Lou's words,

---

<sup>1</sup> Lamott, Anne. *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, 94-95.

“Oh the dragons are gonna fly tonight; they’re circling low and inside tonight; it’s another round in a losing fight.”

On our worst days, maybe. And yet, even then we must realize that there are those who will hold *our* ashes in their hands and toss us into the wind when we are gone. And depending upon the way we have marked the years, those ashes will either sting their eyes with pain or impress themselves upon our loved ones’ hands with substance and of grit, hearkening back to lives lived with forbearance, compassion, and grace. Ponder this Lent which kind of remembrance you will leave. Dwell upon how your ashes will cling to those who remain when you are gone.

And there is more. We know, even as the ashes fall onto earth or water, that there *is* more beyond the ashes. We know that after “all that is clean and alive has been consumed, burned away” there is new life still, to which we look in hope. That light is just beyond the horizon, and even Emmy Lou Harris looks yearningly toward it. She ends her song with these words:

Hoping for a glimpse of Galilee  
Like falling stars from the universe we are hurled  
Down through the long loneliness of the world  
Until we behold the pain become the pearl  
Cryin’ Allelujah, Allelujah  
We cry Allelujah.

But that is the last “allelujah” we will hear for a while, because first there is Lent. First we must reflect upon the character of the ashes we will leave. We are but dust, and to dust we shall return. Amen.