

Each February for the past nine years I've made a pilgrimage, travelling to be with a group of other men at the Male Spirituality Circle which for over thirty years was held at Five Oaks and this year moved to Crieff Hills. It is an amazing and emotionally exhausting time. The four days include drumming, hymn singing, time to walk, rest, and have individual conversations. But the heart of the event is the sharing circle. When someone wishes to speak he picks up the grandfather stone from a table in the centre and shares whatever he would like about himself while everyone else simply listens. When he is done the stone is placed back onto the table and someone else is welcome to pick it up and share. We don't try to solve each other's problems, we just listen with love. In that circle people have laughed, cried, cursed, shared heartbreak, holy moments, and things we have never shared before. The fullness of our lives is set out into that circle and it is held in love, care, and community. It is a holy and healing moment.

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Today we hear the traditional Sunday before Lent reading of Jesus' transfiguration. It's a powerful and deeply symbolic story. Jesus takes three of his disciples, Peter, James, and John to a mountain. In the Bible mountains represent the place where the divine and the human realm meet. It is in this holy place that the disciples see Elijah and Moses standing with Jesus and then hear the words "this is my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." This rich story is about who Jesus is – prophetic words from the Old Testament declare that before the Messiah arrives in the fullness of time Elijah will show up first. We have the

presence of Moses, the one who gave the laws of God – the practices to help people be in harmony with the Divine. We have Elijah, the prophetic presence, the holy voice that calls people into holy relationship with God and with neighbours through lives of love and justice. It is such a profound moment that Peter wants to hold onto it, build some shelters and stay a while longer. But the moment fades, like most awe-filled moments, like a firework a brilliant second and then it is gone.

There is another piece to this tale. Before and after this mountain top moment Jesus talks about how he will be killed. Down the mountain is the road that will lead to more confrontation, to an execution, to suffering and death. This mountaintop moment contains the fullness of time and the fullness of life with all of its hopes and fears, longings and realizations, Awe-filled moments and awful moments, life and death, justice and suffering.

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What an honour we have shared as a community today as we marked Emmie's life as blessed and beautiful through our ritual of Baptism. New life is a holy moment and that is why in our tradition we honour it with the Baptism of babies. Baptisms remind us of the sacredness and goodness of life. With water and oil we marked Emmie's life and all life as beautiful and blessed, as held in the love of God and community.

Nearer to the end of the service we will be taking part in another ancient embodied ritual of our faith that honours and blesses the fullness of life – the marking of the ashes. Traditionally this is held on the first Wednesday of Lent, Ash Wednesday, but instead we are sharing it as a full community

today. Ashes are a rich symbol that can be found throughout the world. Robert Bly, in his book “Iron John: A Book About Men” speaks about the powerful symbol of the ashes. He points out how the symbol of ashes and cinders appear in many fairytales, think of Cinderella – which means little cinder girl. Ashes and cinders symbolize the burned out, depressed, out of it time that the main character faces before they move into an adult life. Throughout the world, Bly points out, ancient cultures used ashes to ritually symbolize the death of the childhood life and birth into the adult life, a life of community, of giving and sharing. Ashes appear throughout the Bible. Job covers himself with ashes as he faces life’s suffering, Jonah and other prophets instruct people to rip their cloths and cover themselves in ashes for living a life out of tune with God which results in injustice and suffering.

Ashes symbolize a movement from the idealized to the real, a movement into the fullness of life where alongside the blessings and joys there is also suffering, injustice, pain, death, lost hopes and dreams. I think most of us can name the ashy places of our lives and of our world. The adult life and the adult faith include both the water and oil of blessing and the ashes.

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When I was living in Northern Ontario I learned the power of burned-out places. One dry spring a fire broke out beside the main highway. The earth was sooty, blackened dead trees still stood, for a long time the air held onto the charcoal smell. Then in a time shorter than I thought it would take, I started seeing the green emerging, new life returning to the burned out places – fed by the ashes. There is life on the other side of the ashes, Cinderella finds life after the burned out place the death of her mother and the cruelty of her step-family places her in. Job finds life after the ashes.

Children move through the ashy initiation into adulthood, a place of community that can hold both life's joys and sorrows, beginnings and endings. Our life includes mountaintop moments and descents into the suffering and unjust places of life, crosses and resurrections, life and death, water and ash.

And when we learn to not be afraid or to hide from the fullness of life we can look around and see that we are not alone in the journey. We are held and supported by the love of God who speaks the words "you are my child, my beloved," we are held in the love of community that can laugh and smile, cry and curse, listen and love us as we offer one another strength to live and face all that life brings. The fullness of life is blessed and held in love.

What a blessing to be together as we share in scripture and take part in holy rituals that honour all that life includes. What a blessing to touch life-giving water and burned out ash and to look around and see that we are not alone, that we are held and strengthened in the love that is known in community. May we live fully and share in the holiness of love and community. Amen. Let it be so.