

Maybe you've seen this little game played with the young kids in your neighborhood. They stand in a circle, singing: "*Ring around the rosies; a pocket full of posies; Ashes, Ashes, we all fall down.*" And then everybody drops to the dust.

There's a story about this children's nursery rhyme that claims the rhyme is rooted in the experience of the Bubonic Plague in Europe. In this explanation, rosies are the sores that the plague caused; posies are flowers used to mask the smell of disease and death, ashes refer to death (although cremation was not practiced at the time of the Plague). And, "we all fall down" refers to death.

A bit of checking out this story shows that the original meaning of the nursery rhyme is actually not about the Plague, as this is a modern interpretation that first emerged only in 1961. Yet, as a reflection useful for Ash Wednesday, it can carry some freight. We humans tend to prefer dancing around the real problems, and try hard to cover up the evidence of illness, drumming up our "posey-plans" for coping. Yet, we still *know* that, in spite of those strategies for trying to fool our neighbors, our selves, and, for good measure, God as well, we can't really shake the quietly insistent internal echo: "*remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*" We "all fall down," and those dusty ashes mark our lives.

*We all fall down:* Isaiah preached a few examples of that: "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist." *We all fall down:* "remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil; offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted."

*We all fall down:* King David in the Psalm for today knew it: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; in your great compassion blot out my offenses. Wash me through and through from my wickedness, and cleanse me from my sin."

*We all fall down:* Paul knew as he wrote to the church in Corinth: He begged them to "Be reconciled to God, now is the acceptable time."

Ashes, ashes, we all fall down, *so remember that you are dust*, the dusty humus that God used to create the human. *And to dust you shall return.* We are not God; our life has limits and we answer to God for it.

Isaiah lays out God's vision for faithful worship: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

Ashes, ashes. Yes, we all like to have our “posies” – dogged attempts to try to get away from the realities and results of human existence: but “*we all fall down.*” Jesus critiques those who want to “posey up” their religiosity, spiff up their reputation and convince themselves that they ought to have earned God’s approval by their own showy efforts – their own variations on “fasting,” going through Godly motions but acting in ungodly ways. Psalm 51 echoes the call to give up the posing, and grow beyond the self-salvation attempts: “*Indeed, you delight in truth deep within me, and would have me know wisdom deep within.*”

Jesus gives us this wisdom about what is truly valuable in life: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Today’s ashes take on a special meaning. They will be formed into the sign of the cross, the forever mark of our baptism—just as the Lord God once stooped down and formed the human creature from the dust of the ground. God saw something in that ordinary lowly dust that was worth getting “down and dirty” with.

So, Lent begins again, with this dust. Not just the dust that we will wear today, but with our Lord down here in our dirty, dusty ashes *with us*, born among us as a vulnerable child, taking on our own ash-marked life, complete with its ultimate end – *ashes, ashes, we all fall down.* Jesus took on our fallenness, our heartbreaks, our struggles, our temptations, our vulnerability. He even took on our death, our dust, in our place.

Now we can trust our ashes to God’s promised Easter life in Jesus. Paul pleads: “*We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” The righteousness of God comes to us, and in us, as we receive the healing promise of Jesus with trust and faith. *Ashes, ashes – we do all fall down,* but Jesus meets us in that dust and raises us up in him. We hear the promise that Isaiah shared: “When you cry for help, God will say, Here I am. Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.”