

Joel 2:12-19
Ash Wednesday
“Remember...”

February 26, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ

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My sisters and brothers in Christ, we are beginning a journey. It's a journey we take every year. It's a journey that lasts 40 days. It's a journey of remembrance. It's a journey of refocus and rededication. It's a journey of repentance. It's a journey toward the cross of Jesus Christ. We begin that journey on this day, Ash Wednesday, a day so named for the ashes that mark our foreheads—ashes that remind us of our sin and in the shape of that cross reminding us of how our sins were wiped away.

You may have noticed over the years, that during Ash Wednesday worship pastors often wear black. Black is the appointed liturgical color for the day. But there is another reason that I am thankful for the black vestments today. These ashes are messy. They get everywhere. They aren't that easy to wash away. They cling to your skin and clothing alike. They make a mess of everything they touch. They are a burden. But they are a reminder. We have all sinned. We all have the stain of sin. It would be nice if we could use something else that was easier to clean up. It would be nice if we just had a little pin that we could fix to our clothing that we could easily remove. But it's appropriate that we use these ashes to mark us, ashes that get everywhere, because sin gets everywhere.

A few years ago, I had the sobering reminder of this fact at another congregation. We sang some hymns. We heard a sermon. And then it was time for the imposition of ashes. And two lines formed approaching the front of the church where the supervising pastor and I stood ready. An elder was the first in my line. And as he approached, I got to speak those words which God spoke to Adam and Eve after they had ushered all of humanity in to sin. “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

It was a sobering night like most Ash Wednesday services. It was sobering because standing before me was a man I knew to be a model Christian. He was faithfully serving the church as an elder. It was a rare occasion when this man would miss Sunday morning Bible class or one of our other Bible classes in the middle of the week. He was eager to reach out to those in the congregation and those in the community who were hurting. He loved his Lord and he was eager to serve Him. But one day, he too would face the wages of sin. And he and I remembered that he was dust and to dust he would return.

But even more striking than this was what happened when he returned to his seat. As he moved aside, I saw who was standing behind him. A young woman, just a few years younger than me was there. She was a sweet woman. Her dad was also an elder. Her brother was about to graduate from seminary and become a pastor. And she loved her Lord too. She was a nice young woman, a gentle soul, but she was also a sinner. So, I made the mark of the cross on her forehead saying those same words, “remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

And then I did and spoke same thing to the infant she held in her arms. Young, sweet Lily. Not even able to speak yet. With pacifier in her mouth she looked up at me with sweet eyes. And I spoke a difficult truth to her too. This sweet little girl was not any more immune to the wages of sin than the rest of us. And the ashes smeared across her forehead in that same somber shape.

And after that, another young mother, the wife of the pastor with 4 children in tow. To all of them “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Sweet little children. But, like those messy ashes, sin gets everywhere.

It's a sobering thought for us to ponder. If we think of these little ones in our lives as sweet and innocent, and they are still marked by sin, how much more are we? We have had years of practice. **All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.** (Romans 3:23) We can try to hide our sin. (Some of us do it better than others.) As we grow in our faith and in living the Christian life, we also often grow in our ability to hide our sin, to look more pious, to look like a model Christian, but

the stain is still there...deep underneath. We still struggle with it whether we want to admit it or not. Pride. Lust. Envy. Anger. Idolatry. We are all dust, and to dust we shall return.

Those ashes which get placed upon our foreheads are a reminder of that somber fact. We see that reminder as we look upon the foreheads of our loved ones—spouses, friends, brothers and sisters in Christ. It's not pleasant. We don't want to think about our loved ones in that way. But it infects us all. The ashes get everywhere because sin gets everywhere.

These ashes we will receive will wash off. A little soap and a bit of scrubbing will remove it in time. But no amount of scrubbing will remove that sin that it represents. No amount of service to the church or the community will cover it. And it doesn't matter how young and innocent or pious some may look. It is there, under the surface, marring our hearts and minds. We are helpless to do anything to remove it. All we can do is acknowledge it, repent of it, and confess it.

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." ^{1 John 1:8-9}

If we say we have no sin, we are claiming to be righteous on our own. And if we think that we are righteous and have something to offer, then Christ has nothing to offer us. But if we remember that we have nothing to offer, nothing other than sorrow and a cry for mercy, then we acknowledge that we are the very people Christ came to call and redeem, sinners in need of salvation. We cry out to Him **"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!"** And when we call out to Him in prayer like David, when we return to our Lord with all our heart, fasting, weeping, and mourning over our sin, and confessing that we are mere beggars before Him, with nothing of our own to offer, no merit or worthiness of our own, then He has everything to offer us.

It is good for us to gather regularly together, here in church, or even in private with a pastor or with one or two of our Christian sisters and brothers. We gather together because we need to be reminded of our sin, to look at the mess that it makes in our lives, to make our confession, to return to the Lord with broken hearts and to ask for His forgiveness, and to offer His forgiveness to one another.

Each of us is reminded by the ashes that we deserve death for our sin—whether it's adultery, theft, coveting, selfishness, simple lying, or anger—we deserve to die, to become dust. But the beauty of the bloody cross and its symbol that we bear today, is that this symbol of God's judgment is the same as the symbol of our reconciliation. We've spoken briefly of this word in Bible class. Reconciliation. It carries a different meaning than simply "resolution." God could have resolved the situation by wiping out humanity, by wiping out all of His formerly very good, and now messy creation. That would have been a resolution, resolving the mess of our sin. And the sin in the world would have been resolved if God had merely left us with those words "remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." But He didn't leave us with just that. Instead He promised reconciliation. Colossians 1 tells us **"in [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."**

Today we begin our long walk of remembrance toward that cross, but we also remember that our journey doesn't end there. Our journey takes us to a tomb. A tomb that will be filled with the one who hung on that cross...A tomb that could not hold in the author of life.

So tonight we remember, "you are dust, and to dust you shall return." But dust you shall not remain...for Jesus Christ has redeemed you from your sin which gets everywhere. Because greater than that sin is His mercy which gets everywhere...His grace which gets everywhere...His blood which gets everywhere that sin gets and washes us clean. And united with Him in your Baptism He will raise you up on the last day to be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, and lives and reigns to all eternity. To Him be the glory now and forever. Amen!