

Genesis 3.19

Ash Wednesday

6 March 2019

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Iesu Iuva +

The sin of the world. Not only does it bring the Lord and God of heaven and earth great displeasure. That's how we often think of it. It also brings corruption and ruin and destruction to the entire created order of God. Gone the spontaneous springing forth of every green thing for food. Instead, weeds and brambles. Gone the burgeoning and flourishing of animal life on the face of the planet. Instead, a world of prey and predator. Eat or be eaten. The destruction of God's good creation.

Your sin. Not only does it bring the Lord and God of heaven and earth great displeasure. That's often how you think of it. Even worse, wherever it goes it carries on its own coattails dread disease and death. And hell follows. Gone the life once given to Adam and Eve—a life of perfect love. A life of perfect trust in the perfect Creator. And such a life unending. A life where there was no fear of dread disease. A life where there was no fear of death and how it will come. A life where there was no fear of hell, the deserved fate of creatures in rebellion against Creator God.

But now that's all gone. And *your* sin? Your sin is your ruination. It is the destruction of the crown of God's creation. It's your annihilation.

And that's why you wear on your forehead the ash. It's the ash of the despair of a sinner standing before the judgment seat of God. It's the ash of recognizing and mourning over what has been lost—life unending and perfect fear, love and trust in the God who created you, as if He ever wanted anything for you but blessing. It's the ash of shame and sorrow. Shame that far from resisting the sin that crouches at your door, you willingly succumb to it. And not just succumb: how often do you even walk out the door to find it? Sorrow that whatever you have coming to you at the righteous judgment of God is justly deserved. Sorrow at the pain your sins has caused others. That your life has left all the good that the good Lord has given you as so much trash on the side of the road. The ash of fear. Fear of the death you know stands at the end of your life. Fear of the cold grave. Fear of the judgment that awaits you when your appointed time arrives.

That's what the ash is. It's not what you're going to turn into. You're going to become dust. That's what the Scripture says: Remember, O man, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Instead, it's the ash of sorrow over sin. It's the ash of contrition. It's the ash of hatred of sin and what it has done and continues to do to you. It's the ash of repentance. The ash of turning from such a hateful thing. And it's the ash of confession. It marks you as death-bound. Which is to say, it marks you as a sinner.

Let that be your preaching today whenever anyone asks about that dust smudge on your forehead.

But be just as quick to give a reason for the hope that is in you.

Because the ash on your forehead isn't a formless smudge. Your repentance begins in despair. Despair of yourself. But it ends in the sure hope of faith. In the hope of faith in the Crucified One.

Because everything that sin wrought has been heaped upon Christ. The only Innocent One steps forth for you as the Only Guilty One. He swaps places with you. And just as Adam's sin lies like a pall over the whole world, the righteousness of Jesus, the Second Adam, lifts the pall. He makes death nothing but a

sleep. For all the dead shall rise on the Last Day. He makes the grave into a bed. For just as you arise every morning, so shall you arise when He returns. And for those who are in Christ—for those who have faith in His all-availing sacrifice for sin—at the Judgment He gives you acquittal in place of condemnation; He tears up the reservation with your name on it in the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels and gives you a room in heaven; and He rescues and saves you from this fallen world.

And all of that couldn't be more graphically preached than by what you wear on your forehead. Because if it's true that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, then He certainly came into the world to save you. There can be no argument about it.

You heard the words: Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. You shall return to dust because you shall die. You shall die because you're a sinner. And you shall be saved by this One who came into the world to save sinners.

So remember, O man, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. But never forget: it was never this you were made for. The Lord created you for eternal life. And in His beloved Son, He has restored it to you.

May the good and gracious Lord keep you in that faith to life everlasting.

Amen.

sdg
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