

Ash Wednesday—February 22, 2023

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Ashes on your forehead or not, you are going to die. Each year is this service and the sign of the cross is made in ash on your foreheads as you mark the beginning of Lent and “remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” This is what you see and hear and it’s the same thing said to the elderly, middle aged, teenagers, children, and babies. All are reminded of the same thing; you are going to die unless Jesus returns first. Ash Wednesday stares you in the face and says, “You are not safe, and you never will be. Death is crouching at the door.”

That’s a stark thing to think about, then, isn’t it? When God created man in his image, he said “it was good.” Adam and Eve were created as the good creation of the good and holy God. Yet when the woman and man ate of the tree God spoke a word to them which showed them what their sin had brought about. To the man, Adam, God said, “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” God wasn’t simply saying your body is only going to waste away and decay, it is true that happens because of the fall into sin, but it goes beyond that and is far more serious. God is being true to his promise that eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would bring about death. The wages of sin is death. Man is the creation of the eternal God and man is the one who sinned against him. Man was formed by God from the dust and after thinking he knew better than the Almighty God, the Lord puts him in his place and shows him where he really stands in all of this after the Fall.

And that’s who you are too. You are dust and to dust you shall return. Does it make you uncomfortable? It should make you uncomfortable not in a way in which you feel uneasy but in which you are stirred to your core. God knows your hearts. He knows what it is you desire, think, and believe. There is no escape even as you are sinful from the time of conception in your mother’s womb you are heading from that very instant toward the grave. And all that is sinful deserves this sentence and no one can wiggle his way around it. Jesus tells you, in the Gospel reading, about your heart and where it is you are to look so listen again to what he says to you. “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Did you listen to Jesus? So, what about it? Where is your heart today and each day? When you look at God’s commandments what does God tell you about where your heart is and where is your treasure? What or who is it you love and hold dear and hold fast to as one holds fast and guards treasure? Well, the Epistle reading tonight teaches you what your life is to look like as baptized people of God and admonishes you to see this instruction. God inspired St. Peter to write, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Is that what your life looks like? Have you been making every effort “to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love?” Or has your life been making every effort to love treasures of this world which are not eternal and as Jesus said, “where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal?”

It's no coincidence, then, that all the other commandments come back to the first commandment that "you shall have no other gods." Luther rightly writes about this in the Large Catechism when we read, "So the First Commandment is to shine and give its splendor to all the others. Therefore, you must let this declaration run through all the commandments. It is like a hoop in a wreath, joining the end to the beginning and holding them all together." Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

When you examine your hearts, you see there are many things we treasure. Follow the paper and time trail of your heart and you will find your treasure. Look at your schedules, your credit card statements or bank accounts. Think about the conversations you've had this past week and what the content has been. Think about what you've watched, read, downloaded, or simply consumed. Think about what you been worrying about and anxious over. Jesus teaches you something very important with these words. He teaches you how easy it is for you to create idols or false gods out of anything. You can do this without even realizing it and before you know it, your hearts are intertwined not with the one true God but with someone or something else. Jesus warns, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. To hold fast to the cares and pleasures of this world and its enticements is to live your lives according to your desires and choices. The call of God tonight is to look at yourself and who you are. Ask yourself the questions, "do I fear God? What do I really care about and how do I live my life?" What has your life been consumed by and being lived by? Now, with those questions examining yourself, what is your treasure? Where is your heart? God tells you, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

The reading from Joel tonight is a call to repentance, to return to the Lord. Yet these words of the prophet Joel also comfort because you see God in his mercy toward you. Knowing and confessing rightly that you are dust these words ring out as light in the darkness of your hearts and replace it with the forgiveness, love, and compassion of Christ. The prophet Joel wrote, "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster." God knows you are dust and God is gracious and merciful. This means absolutely everything, and this is your redemption. The reading from Joel 2 ends with this, "Then the Lord became jealous for his land and had pity on his people. The Lord answered and said to his people, 'Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations.'"

Dear people of God, the Lord doesn't simply let sin slip, but he takes the price that is justly owed and puts it onto himself. You are dust but you are dust who are redeemed by the blood of Christ. In Romans 5 God says, "Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many." Adam was dust and returned to the dust. Jesus, the second Adam would not see corruption but instead endured death in order to atone for sin, your sin, and the sin of the whole world, and redeem you. The sign of the cross marks you because the crucified Lord is your Savior who has died in your place in order that you are forgiven and have eternal life. In baptism you have been clothed with him, crucified with him, and raised with him into new and everlasting life.

For you dear Saints of God behold Jesus Christ crucified for you. The Son of God took upon himself human flesh and blood and perfectly obeyed God's law. He is your substitute on the cross suffering and satisfying God's wrath which burns against sin. He is your mercy seat by which you now have peace with God and stand righteous before God's throne. You are his treasure which he has bought with a price.

You are marked as dust, but you are marked by Christ the crucified. When you go home tonight and try to rub the ash off your forehead or your kid's you find out quickly how hard it can be to scrub that off. But know that just as you rub that reminder of death off you or your loved one's head, the day is coming when at the voice of Jesus and his command to rise, your bodies will rise from their graves. At that word of resurrection your mortal bodies will be restored and put on what is immortal and incorruptible.

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Lent is here upon you once again. Remember that you are dust and repent. Know and cling to Christ who destroyed death by his death and gives you eternal life. Rejoice in your redemption in Christ who has created in you a clean heart and renewed a right spirit within you and will never cast you away from his presence for he alone is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Rightly know your place as dust but know in faith with all boldness and confidence in Christ that you are redeemed and in eternal life you shall live.

With renewed vigor hear all this today and cling to Jesus who is the second Adam, the man who does not see corruption and goes down into the dust but instead redeems you by his blood. Know with confidence that your sin has been put away and you have a new life in Christ that seeks him and his righteousness. You are baptized and God's name is placed upon you as he has claimed you as his own. Now even though you are a man of dust you are an heir of eternal life. Even if your body does return to the dust, that is goes to death, and your body decays your Lord is the Lord who doesn't despise what he has made but shows you mercy and forgives your sin. You see in your future the Lord raising your body up no longer as men of dust but men of immortality and incorruption even as Jesus is raised and the first fruits of them that sleep. That's all yours and your treasure you have through faith and a real lasting righteousness that confesses this to the world around you. Your reward is given on account of Jesus, your righteousness. He is your treasure. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Your treasure is with him and his new creation which will never go to dust but will be full, perfect, beautiful, and living forever.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.