



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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Ash Wednesday

March 6, 2019

“Remember Dust”

(Psalm 103:13-17)

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“As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps. 103:13-17).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, You despise nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and contrite hearts that lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness we may receive from You full pardon and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

So, I have the best view in the house right now. All those ashen crosses on your foreheads. It's a remarkable experience imposing the ashes. I wouldn't say it's fun, but it is poignant . . . from the youngest who are hopefully many decades away from death and dying: "Dust you are and to dust you shall return." To those for whom death and dying are very much on their minds and for whom it may even be imminent: "Dust you are and to dust you shall return." Some of you with a full head of youthful hair had to hold it all back, using both hands, just so I could find the forehead. One older gentleman last year, with a forehead I could hardly miss (wide and tall), and with a wry smile, he offered to hold back the few strands of hair he had left on the top of his head. In spite of the good humor, "Dust you are, [+] and to dust you shall return."

The ashes are black and remind us of the blackness of sin. "Ash Wednesday" also marks the first day of Lent, a season of repentance from the blackness of sin.

This year, the theme of our midweek services is "A Lent to Remember." Each week, we'll focus on something God remembers or something God causes us to remember. There's a big difference between the two. When God remembers, he does something. His memory prompts action. When we remember something, it may not prompt anything. It's like one person saying, "You forgot my birthday" and the other replying, "No. I remembered your birthday. I just didn't do anything about it." God's memory prompts action. God's memory prompts grace.

By the time this Lenten season is over, my prayer is that the power of God's Word will cause us to remember the way God remembers, with action, not just thoughts or words.

In our text, the psalmist writes, God "knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust" (v 14). God knows exactly how

we are made because he made us. God crafted human life by hand. Everything else he created by saying, “let there be” and the power of his Word brought the thing into existence. “Let there be light’, and there was light.” But the crowning achievement of God’s creation—the creation of human life—that was different. Gen 2:7, “The Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground”. (That Hebrew word for “formed” is a very hands-on word. It’s the same word used to describe what a potter does with clay.) “The Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” That breathing part sounds close too, intimate even. He used dust and his own breath as the raw material, and that wasn’t a bad or lowly thing. Remember, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). Even the dust from which we were made was “very good.”

But sin came and it changed everything, ruined everything, degraded everything. Now the dust isn’t so lovely anymore.

For example, many deliberately forget that we come from God’s own creating hand. They even turn to other “gods,” idols formed with their own hands. But however hard we may try, no one can escape the fact that we are still dust, and even this wonderfully made dust will eventually go back to dust because of sin and its wages. Gen 3:19 says: “for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Sometimes we forget that sad truth, or try not to think about it. But on Ash Wednesday, it’s good to remember; it’s good to go back to the basics. The wages of sin is death. We are sinners. Therefore we will die. We are dust, and therefore we shall return to the dust. That’s about as back to the basics as it can possibly be.

But going back to the basics also means remembering that, in spite of our sin, God still cares about us, loves us even! Our text says, “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him . . . for he remembers we are dust” (v 13).

God remembers we are dust. But we are his dust, his people, his children. So God deals with us with compassion, as a loving father deals with his child. We see God's compassion best in Jesus. In Matthew 14, "When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed them." Jesus remembered they were dust, felt sad for them because of their need, and did something about that need.

God remembers we are dust, and the shape of that smudge on your foreheads reminds us how far he was willing to go for us. That's where he died for you, with the blackness of your sin, to forgive and redeem you, buy you back from sin and rescue you from it.

That smudge also reminds us of our baptisms where we also received the sign of the cross on our foreheads. It's a mark of ownership. "This one is mine. I died for this one, have forgiven this one. I have adopted this one to be my own. Sin and death, you no longer have any claim over this one. Devil: you will keep your hands off this one."

All this comes up again at the very end, after a loved one has died. In those tents at the cemetery, surrounded by the immediate family, it's always a bit of a relief for me at that point to just let the liturgy say what needs saying. I don't have to search for my own words, struggle for them, reach for them. The words are given me, and have been made lean and precise and beautiful over the centuries. "We now commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust." We say that looking at a coffin suspended over a hole, or the urn half full of ashes and dust already, surrounded by thousands of other grave stones. There's no denying death out there in the cemetery. So the Lord means business when he talks about ashes and dust.

But he also means business when he talks about his compassion and salvation in Christ. "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body . . ." Even if they're just dust, he'll raise

them up as new bodies! Incorruptible bodies! Made glorious! Bodies that won't break down because of age, bodies that function the way they were always intended to . . . made to run and not grow weary, to walk and not be faint, or as Habakkuk wrote, "to leap like the deer."

With another prayer we commend the old body to the Lord's keeping. Then comes the Lord's Prayer, and one concluding prayer. And this last one? It's a doozy. It calls for all the faith we can muster. As I launch into this prayer, I often think to myself, "Let the Lord's foot in the door and he's going to start acting as if he owns the place!" The prayer goes like this. "Almighty God, by the death of your Son Jesus Christ you destroyed death. . ." Imagine, we say that out there surrounded by all those grave stones. "You destroyed death." And then, "Receive our thanks for the victory over death and the grave which Jesus won for us." This prayer invites you to look your present reality in the face, and deny it! You get to say to death: you're not so tough, you're not so fearsome, your sting not so dangerous after all, your grip on not so strong, your little victory not so permanent. We get to say that because there's a different reality that is truer still, more trustworthy and reliable, a reality based on God's own Word and promise and grace and victory, the big and eternal victory he won for us with his death and resurrection.

So that prayer concludes with these words, "Keep us in everlasting fellowship with all that wait for him on earth and with all in heaven, who are with him who is the resurrection and the life, Jesus Christ our Lord."

Because of sin, death has a claim on each of us. But the Father's claim on us is far stronger. He knows our frame. He remembers we are dust. And in Jesus Christ, he has had compassion on us and has rescued us from death and is bringing us into everlasting life. Thanks be to God! Amen.

