

Ash Wednesday 2021

February 17, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is a truth that we speak on Ash Wednesday that we often would like to ignore during the rest of the year. When we proclaim today, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” we tell the truth about our mortality. We admit that we will one day die.

Today, we admit this truth through words that cannot be ignored, disputed, evaded or denied. Certainly, in this last year, our own mortality, and the mortality of our loved ones has been hard to forget. In the midst of a pandemic that has killed some of our loved ones, and has affected us all, death is undeniable. However, at the same time, our culture continues to seek to deny the reality of death. Our culture claims that many of those who died from COVID-19 would have died anyway, or our culture tries to tell us that most of the people that died were elderly and expendable or somehow less important than the rest of the population. It’s telling that of the richest and most powerful individuals in this world that have contracted this deadly virus, very few have died from it. They seemed to have access to protection that’s not available to everyone who needs it. Perhaps this denial of death has even contributed to the severity of the pandemic. There was a 12% increase in deaths in the United States in 2020 compared to 2019. In other words, over 330,000 more people in our country died this past year compared to the total number of people that died the year before. We are living constantly in tension between knowing the imminence of our death and the deaths of our loved ones, and living in a culture that tries to deny the inevitability of death.

But today, on this Ash Wednesday, we gather here in church—or worship from our homes—and we proclaim aloud this truth that causes us such sadness, grief and fear. We must admit this truth that we’d rather hide from, that we’re told not to discuss in polite company. Today we proclaim the truth aloud, and we proclaim it faithfully: We are mortal. We were born, and we will one day die.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” From dust to dust. And as if hearing the words were not enough, as if being told that we will one day die is not enough, today we rub a symbol of death onto each of our faces. The palms from last year’s Palm Sunday triumphant celebration are now dried and dead and burned, and become the ashes that mark our foreheads on this solemn day. With ashes on our foreheads, our inevitable death becomes particularly visible.

But then Jesus takes this reality one step further. He reminds us that dust is the destination of not just our bodies, but of all those things that we have built around us as well. Our homes and businesses will come to an end. Our communities and country, and our planet will come to an end. Even our church will come to an end. Moth and rust and thieves can—and will—reduce to dust virtually every goal, every dream, every value, and every treasure we hold dear. The death of all things is inescapable. And so, these words of simple, absolute truth give us a perspective that the world tries to both hide and deny. And it’s a truth that we usually do our best to ignore too. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Dust and ashes. This is what we see in our future if we look ahead far enough and honestly enough. Ultimately all things and all of humanity will come to an end. Today we see this, and we know its truth and power. And we usually understand this to be bad news. These grim, honest words about our own mortality and the mortality of everything around us can be

devastating. But there is good news within these words too. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

As we hear these words, we remember the creation story when God formed Adam out of the dust of the earth, when God carefully crafted and molded his body, and breathed life into him so that he became a living being. Adam and Eve were beautiful creations of God, lovingly made and formed in God’s own image, given life from God’s own breath. And we, too, are God’s beloved creations, formed and made from the dust, and given life and breath from God. From the very beginning, God was with us, and from the beginning of time, God has been our creator. Our world did not come into existence simply by chance, and humanity was not created by accident. The dust of our beginnings—the dust from which we came—was purposefully formed by God. Our lives are gifts from God, and nothing less. God molded each of us from the dust of the earth with God’s own hands, and God’s Spirit breathed life into each of us.

So, part of the good news is that God has made each of us from the dust. We came into existence through God’s grace and power, and God remains with us through our entire lives. Our dust, from before it was formed and made into our body, and until it returns again to dust and ashes, our dust is holy. The dust that makes up our bodies has been set apart and blessed by God. So, then, if we pay attention, what appears to be a threat, “you are dust”, becomes a promise. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” The grace and love present at our creation will see us through our entire lives, through our death, to our return to dust, and beyond. Our dust is holy, and it is forever cared for and protected by God’s unfailing love.

But as we are reminded of our mortality, as we remember that we are holy dust, we must also notice something else. Just as God has formed us carefully from the dust, the dust that we will place on our foreheads today is not simply tossed there or scattered at random. The ashes we will bear are placed in the form of the cross. In this action, we are reminded that we are not just mere mortals, but we are mortals that are connected to Christ’s Good Friday and Easter morning. The Apostle Paul assures us, “If we have been united with Christ in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” As Christians, we are a people formed around dying and rising. Christ has died and risen. And the cross that is marked on our forehead reminds us that even though we too will die and return to the dust, we *will* be resurrected to new and eternal life.

And so, dust and ashes are good news. Even as we struggle with sadness and fear as we name our mortality, we are also reminded that we forever rest in God’s promises. The ashes that we wear on our foreheads point us toward the power and love of God—both at the beginning and the end. We hear that in the beginning we were literally held in God’s hands as God gathered the dust of the earth, and molded our bodies. And we hear that God continues to hold us throughout our lives, caring for us, providing for us, and protecting us throughout our journey. And when it is time to die and return to the dust, God promises to hold us then, too. God promises that our return to the dust shall not be the end, and that just as we have died with Christ, we shall also rise with Christ to new life.

So, on this Ash Wednesday, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This is the truth of our existence, and we rejoice. Because we are not just dust, but we are holy dust, loved, and cherished, and held by God. God is with us in the beginning, and in the end, and in every moment in between. Thanks be to God. Amen.