

1 March 2006
Ash Wednesday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Ashes of Paradise Lost”

I do not think there are many things sadder to look at than the ashes of a burned out home. What had once been a place of laughter and warmth, of love and togetherness, of growing and living, reduced by hungry flames to a pile of ash. And walking among the ashes, maybe a scrap of a photo that escaped the flames; a piece of wall that once held memories; the voices of times both good and bad seeming to call from the dust. That is where we used to put the Christmas tree. Over there is where we gathered around the TV to ring in the New Year. But now there is no home. Only a heap of ashes.

Actually, I think Adam might have wished for that! Instead, the flames that he saw were not of his home, Eden, being devoured, but the flaming sword of the angels, guarding the way back; barring his way home. A constant reminder of his sin, his rebellion, and what used to be, but no longer was. And every time the sweat of his brow trickled down his face and stung into his eyes, he could look up, look back, and remember. What had once been a place of laughter and warmth, of love and togetherness *with God*, of growing and living, now off limits to him. It was no longer home. He had been exiled. Paradise lost. And the heap of arsoned ashes would not one day be Eden devoured, *it would be him*. How sad.

And perhaps we wonder: O Adam, Eve, why? *Why did you do it?* In love the Father created you both in his own image and likeness, so that as He is in Heaven, so were you on earth. *Was that not good enough for you?* In love the Father gave you bodies and souls, wisdom and beauty, innocence and purity. *Was it somehow not up to par?* In love the Father planted the Garden called Eden, and gave you this little piece of heaven on earth as your home sweet home. *Was this five-star Paradise not up to your standards?* In love the Father gave you to one another, man to woman and woman to man, that you might live in an unending honeymoon of wedded bliss. *Was your spouse not quite perfect enough for you?* In love the Father gave you every single tree of Eden for food, save one. *Was He being tight-fisted with you, holding out on you, by keeping you from that which would only work everlasting harm to you?* O Adam, Eve, why?

Well, that is the question we need ask ourselves this night, O sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. Or would we try to remove the speck from our parents' eyes while a log sticks out of

our own! On this night and season of repentance, would we instead try to season our repentance to make it a bit easier to swallow? Blaming Adam for all our troubles, and Eve for the flame of sin that burns inside us? If so, is not this latter deception even worse than the first? For do we not out-Adam Adam, and out-Eve Eve, elbowing our way to be first in line to sink our teeth into what is forbidden? Do we not only give our ears and hearts to listen to temptation, but also use our lips to tempt others? Do not the pleasures in our eyes become the gods in our hearts? How do the ashes taste? How much better is your home, your life, now?

It is sad, is it not? We have been exiled. Our paradise lost. And it is my fault, my own fault, my own most grievous fault. And as the ashes on your foreheads tonight remind you, the heap of ashes will one day be you. Consumed by the hungry flames of sin and death. We hear it as we stand by the side of the grave: *ashes to ashes, dust to dust*. It doesn't get much sadder than that. . . . But it does get worse! For dust you are but to *worse than dust* you will return if you receive not the grace of Christ Jesus. For the flames that then await burn but do not consume.

But tonight, your Father is calling to you. Calling to you in His Son. To repent. To return. To return to your Father who stands daily gazing out the window, eagerly waiting for you, his prodigal children, to come home from the pigsty. From the sin we have been wallowing in. To come home, to the garden he did not torch, but has still prepared, and is still keeping for you.

But how can we return? *What about the Judge*, who exiled us from Paradise? We need not fear Him, for His judgment has been executed, His anger fully spent, upon a substitute, a second Adam, His Son, who allowed the flaming sword of justice to fall upon Him on the cross, in our place. For Christ who knew no sin became sin for us. Our sin. Our curse. So now is the day of salvation for us. Now is the day of homecoming, in Him.

And what about the angels, those guards with flaming swords, ready to reduce all trespassers to ashes? We need not fear them, for they who once menacingly guarded Paradise now joyously sing of the Saviour, announcing ***“peace on earth, goodwill toward men.”*** (Lk 2) They spoke the good news of our Saviour's resurrection to those who came to the grave to mourn. They no longer threaten, but now *rejoice* at every sinner who returns and repents (Lk 15:10), and having hammered their swords into trumpets, are now ready to recall our bodies from the ashes on the last day (Rev 11:15), to the homecoming of Heaven.

And what about the ancient Serpent, his fangs, the poison he injected still running through

our veins? We need not fear him either, for the heel of the One on the cross has come down as the anvil on the head of the one slithering on the ground. And the One on the cross has given us His body to heal our body, and His blood to cleanse our blood.

And so sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, tonight look up from the ashes, and see that your exile has come to an end! Adam's woes have turned to Jesus' invitation: "***Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.***" And Satan's lies have turned into Jesus' promise: "***Today, you will be with me in Paradise.***" For in the waters of Holy Baptism, have we not been crucified with Christ? (Gal 2:19; Rom 6) And now you He remembers when He comes into His kingdom. He will not forget. He does not forget. He cannot forget.

And so tonight you have returned. Not just tonight, but perhaps we could say *especially* tonight. Returned here, to the Garden that God Himself calls home – His Church. And here you truly are home again, where you belong, with your Father, who has prepared a Table before you beneath the branches of the Tree of Life. To take, eat, and dine on its fruit, and be filled with the body and life of the One who gave up His life on its branches. To take, drink, and satisfy your thirst with His blood, the fruit of that vine. To hear the family story, and all that God has done for you.

For by the sweat of His brow, like drops of blood, the second Adam, Jesus Christ, has earned for you the bread of life. In love, He has provided living water so that you will never thirst again. In love, He has earned your way back into the Eden of God's presence. In love, He has crushed the head of the serpent. In love, He has bid the angels sheath their swords. In pure and perfect love, He has made everything new and ready for you, His beloved Eve, His Bride, the Church. And He bids you come – *come home*, to Him. You have nothing to fear. Come in sin and be forgiven. Come in ashes and be washed clean. Come hungry and thirsty and be satisfied in His forgiving feast. Come in poverty and be filled with Him. Come to Him, for He wants nothing else. Come! Welcome back from exile. Welcome back to Eden. Welcome home!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.