

17 February 2021
Ash Wednesday

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Dust You Were, and to Life You have Returned”

Text: 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; Joel 2:12-19

Gradual: Hebrews 12:2

Ash Wednesday puts us in our place. *Dust you are and to dust you will return.* Adam was created from such dust. But he wasn't meant to return to it. That came because he decided to be his own creator, create his own reality, a better reality than that which God gave him. It didn't take him long. God created all things in six days, but Adam in an instant. He ate, along with Eve, and there was a new reality: **death**. And from this new reality there is no rest, no reprieve. In God's creation, there was a seventh day, a day of rest for us. Not so in Adam's. Death's tyranny takes no days off. This past year has driven that home as each day we are told of more deaths. Every day the number increasing. That's not new, of course. But it has been brought to the fore.

Dust you are and to dust you will return.

And none of us knows when. This past year has shown us that as well. Just when you think everything is fine, suddenly it's not. We all think we're going to live a long life, but death is a tyrant here, too. Taking not just the old but the young. Not just the weak but the strong. Not just the sick but the well. And like as with Adam, at times in an instant. No preparation, no warning. Jesus knows it. Be ready always is His admonition to us. We think: I'll do it tomorrow. Ash Wednesday says: there may not be a tomorrow.

Dust you are and to dust you will return.

In this COVID year, some churches will skip giving ashes, some will be sprinkling them instead of pressing them into foreheads. But there's something about putting a cross of dust and ashes on the same place where the sign of the cross was first placed upon you in the waters of baptism. It's very Adamic. For not from dust we you and I created, but in the water of baptism we were born from above as children of God. But sin has subjected us, imposed upon us, the dust and ashes of death. The sin we do, thinking, like Adam, that we know better than God; that we can do better than God. His Word just one among many. His commands mere suggestions. Yet still we die.

Dust you are and to dust you will return.

But this too: *Dust you are and to life you will return.*

For just as one man brought sin and death into the world, so one man also brings life into

the world. *The one who was made sin for our sake, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.* Right with God again. No longer cast into death but risen to life with Him. With Jesus. For where Jesus is, sin does not have the last word. Where Jesus is, death does not have the last word. For where Jesus is, there are the words of forgiveness and life. For Jesus is our creator, creating a new reality for us through His death and resurrection. All our sin was dumped on Him, and all His righteousness poured on us. That we who are dust might rise to life.

And we do know when and we do know where. Right here. Where Jesus has promised to be for us. Washing the dust of death off us. Feeding us with food not of this world. And filling our ears with words of promise, words of forgiveness, words that lift us up from the dust because they are words filled with the power and Spirit of God. And we live again. The death of the first Adam overcome by the life of the second.

Dust you are and to life you will return.

Ash Wednesday preaches that, too, turning us in the right direction again: not towards ourselves and what we can do, but toward the cross and what Jesus has done for us. *O come, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, we sang* (Gradual). For only in His righteousness is the life we need.

So *beware*, Jesus says, *of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.* Because then both your eyes and their eyes are in the wrong place - not on Jesus. And your heart isn't in the right place. And then your righteousness falls short because, well, it's your righteousness, not Jesus'. Because of what you did, not because of what Jesus did and then gave to you.

Beware, Jesus says, because that's the kind of righteousness your old Adam likes. Because it looks good. It feels good. Adam's tree *was good for food, and a delight to the eyes, and was to be desired to make one wise* (Genesis 3:6), but it was a Trojan Horse of sin and death. So, too, our righteousness - our prayers done to be seen, our alms given to be praised, and our struggle to be pious for the admiration and exaltation of others. It's good to do those things. We're commanded to do those things. When you do those things, Jesus says, assuming that we will.

But don't do them for righteousness, but from righteousness. Do them because your righteousness comes from above. Do them because that is the new life you have been given in Christ. Because **dust you were, and to life you have returned.** Yes, past tense. Done. It is yours in Christ Jesus. You are risen *already* in Him. You may have one foot in the grave, but the other is in heaven. For while Ash Wednesday puts us in our place here and now, in this life, Jesus puts us in His place, with Him, for eternal life.

Dust you were, and to life you have returned.

That's the truth of this day. That our Creator is our re-creator. That the founder of our faith is the perfecter of our faith (Gradual). That the one who is only life, dies, that we who die might live. That the one *who knew no sin became sin for us, that in Him we might become the righteousness of God*. That a cross designed to deal a horrible death becomes the means to a wonderful and eternal life.

So today we fast and weep and mourn, as the prophet Joel said, because *we are dust and to dust we will return*. But we do so not wondering whether our Lord will turn to us and relent and leave a blessing behind Him. He already has. *He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love*. He has turned to us in His Son, we have heard His Absolution, and He has left us here the feast of His Body and Blood; the feast of salvation.

So come, O men and women of the dust. For dust you are, but life is here, for you.

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