

## ASH WEDNESDAY

Text: Joel 2:12-19; St. Matthew 6:1-21

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

*“For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.”*

Today is the day of ashes. I am pleased that we have the custom of the imposition of ashes here at Our Savior. This rite, the application of ashes, draws its meaning from the first day of ashes, the day of the Fall of Creation; the day our LORD God said to our first parents, Adam and Eve, *“For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.”* Ashes, in light of Holy Scripture, have always been the mark of confession. To wear ashes on one’s forehead is our confession that we are dead in our sins; that there is nothing in us that merits the love and care of our God, and by all that is holy, God should hate us.

When one has the ashes of burnt palm fronds from Palm Sunday past smeared upon his or her forehead in the shape of a cross, it makes a mess. One is left with an ugly stain signifying his or her sin, in the shape of the only answer for sin—the Cross of JESUS CHRIST. Therefore, ashes are as fitting a symbol for life as they are for sin and death.

Today, those who have ashes placed on their foreheads remember the first indictment of the stain of sin when God sent Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Even so, just as God sent Adam and Eve into exile with a promise of future redemption in which He would place enmity between man and Satan, so too, the ashes of Ash Wednesday serve to fix our eyes firmly on CHRIST’s cross and resurrection.

Remember then, that you are dust. *“For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.”* But remember also, that by the grace of God through CHRIST JESUS, it is from that same dust that you rise and live again!

For Christians who observe Ash Wednesday, it has become a portal, a door of sorts, that opens onto the season of Lent, and Lent is about Good Friday and Easter. So it is, that we Christians are a people who live in the eternal Day of our redemption and Resurrection through the blood of CHRIST, as we await the fulfillment of all things to be brought to completeness in the Day of JESUS CHRIST. As we look forward to that coming Day when JESUS’ will return on the clouds of heaven, we prepare for its climactic, annual celebration Holy Week and Easter morning by way of Lent.

Though we look forward to Good Friday and Easter, for us Lutheran Christians, Ash Wednesday is a somber preparation. It is somber because the ashes we wear call us to repentance. Repentance is the only preparation known by the Church. But our repentance does

not wear a long face, nor does it make a great show of, or disfigure itself. For we are not in mourning, but joy. Our joy *is* subdued, but it *is* joy, nonetheless.

We celebrate with joy because we know the end of the story. Thus, we wait in quiet, yet excited, expectation of what will be on the Last Day when we will be set free from our graves at the blast of the last trumpet, and rise with shouts of joy and songs of thanksgiving.

Yet, as I said, for now, our joy is restrained and is let free in short bursts on annual Easter mornings. Because our joy is restrained, its release can be very emotional and moving. But fasting, repentance, and prayer are the content of Lent.

Therefore, the season of Lent is not for creating warm emotions, not even religious emotions. Neither is Lent an attempt to impress God with how much we can do without or how bad we can make ourselves feel. Lent is about a rending of your heart, not your garments. The season of Lent is our confession that God is right and we are wrong. Again, it is about repentance. It is about reverence for the miracle of our God who took on our flesh and suffered and died for us.

Warm emotions, even warm religious emotions are nice and for this we give thanks. We can welcome them when they come. But when they do not come, when the stomach grumbles in spiritual hunger, when the eye grows weak in weariness because of our sins, when our flesh rallies against our weak spirit and it takes every ounce of strength to wait and watch even for an hour; when we are tired, frustrated, confused, and angry, lonely, depressed, or afraid, for those times too, we give thanks. For God's strength is found in our weakness. His grace is sufficient. It is in our helplessness, that we learn to live by faith.

It is especially at these times of weakness that we can feel the closeness of our LORD JESUS. God's will is done when our will is broken. It is then that we know that CHRIST is LORD and we are not; His death is the death of death and the beginning of true and eternal life.

Our restrained, yet excited, joy and expectation know that soon we will find our rest in JESUS. It knows that we shall soon abide in that place where there is no sinful flesh to drag us down, no old Adam to be beaten back. It knows that in that place only redeemed and sanctified, perfect, risen flesh, washed clean in the Blood of the Lamb of God, without sinful desires, without aches and pains, with souls that no longer suffer loneliness, disappointment, or depression, where tears are tears of joy not sorrow, are to be found there. It is this expectation that gives us strength to lift our ashen heads, for behold, the Day is coming when there will be no fasting, no ashes, no sorrow, no sin, no pain, no sickness, no death.

This then is the meaning of what we do this night: Easter is coming. The way of sorrow that our LORD leads us down is not easy or pleasant. But by it He has gained our salvation; death, hell, and sin have been overcome, and the grave is left empty, once... for all.

Now we come as the prophet Joel bids us: *“with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning,”* in repentance and quietness. For our God is *“gracious and merciful, slow to anger,*

*and of great kindness.*” Your LORD is zealous for you and has taken pity on you. He has not allowed His SON to die in vain. He has accepted His sacrifice, and plucking you out of the dust of the earth, He speaks these words to you: *“I forgive you all your sins.”*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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