

ASH WEDNESDAY

Text: Joel 2:12-19; St. Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21

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

This evening we have heard our LORD JESUS say, “... *when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men*” and “... *when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men*” and again, “... *when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting.*” In summation, “... *you shall not be like the hypocrites.*”

“*You shall not be like the hypocrites.*” But does not the wearing of ashes on one’s forehead mark you as a hypocrite? Are we not disregarding our Lord’s warning about wearing our faith on our sleeve, so to speak, for no other purpose than to be seen by men that we may appear to them to be holy?

Well... whether you realized it or not, with these ashes you have made a confession. You see, the ashes that are smeared on your forehead symbolize a somewhat dark truth. You heard that truth proclaimed as the ashes were applied: “*Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return.*” The wearing of ashes this day is a somber confession that we are a fallen race, living in a fallen creation. It is a confession that you live under a curse—a curse that by your own reason or strength, you can never hope to escape.

No amount of groveling, no tearful promises to do better next time, can negotiate your release from this curse. It is a family curse and has been a part of your ancestry since time beyond imagining, for it is the curse shared by the family of man, and through man it has come on all creation. It is the curse purchased by the sins of your first parents, Adam and Eve, and pronounced by your Creator, and is written in the third chapter of Genesis, “*You [will] return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.*”

Thus, we find ourselves standing and staring into the dark gaping maw of our own graves, our toes hanging over the precipice. Standing there we can hear the words spoken over us and every one of our brothers and sisters committed to that cold dark place, “*earth to earth, dust to dust.*” The curse I speak of is death, and by wearing the ash of death on your forehead this evening you are confessing that this is what your sin has bought for you. So, the ash you wear is not a sign of hypocrisy, it is a confession.

Do these words bother you? I admit that these words are rather grim, but their being grim does not change the truth of them. No amount of hiding or denial can ever change the truth. Sure, it is a bit uncomfortable to contemplate your mortality. And well it should be. It should

be uncomfortable because death is not natural; it is not your friend; it is not just a part of the great circle of life. Death is an alien, an interloper, a serpent that came slithering into paradise to steal the life of God's creation.

And so, like the ancients, who put ashes on their heads as a sign of penitence and mourning, we put ashes on our heads this day, confessing and reminding ourselves that one day, we too will die. Ash Wednesday and the ashes of this day in particular, are solemn and sobering reminders that the judgment of God still stands; it has not been revoked. His judgment comes down through history and reaches every people, of every race, and every nation. His judgment leaves no one untouched. No one gets out of this world alive. On your own, you will not escape our LORD's sentence of death.

The ashes, the reminder of God's curse, the talk about death and the grave, Ash Wednesday and the whole Lenten season, really serve only one purpose: to focus the hearts and minds of God's holy people on Good Friday and Easter morning. For the events of Good Friday are God's antidote for the curse of death, and Easter morning is God's seal of acceptance and approval of the events of Good Friday, and our LORD JESUS' death for our sake.

That is what JESUS means when He tells us, *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* For truly, what greater treasure is there than the passion, death, and resurrection of JESUS CHRIST for the life of the world?

So we prepare. We *"...turn to [our God] with all our heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning."* But we do not prepare as the hypocrites do. We do not wear long faces and make a great show of things. We are to *"rend [our] hearts and not [our] garments."* For Lent is not a matter of self-denial and long faces. It is not a matter of outward holiness for the sake of impressing others, to show how Christian we are. That would only be an empty show of our own self-righteous piety and hypocrisy. Those who make such a great show of things seek only to impress men. JESUS tells us they have already received their reward.

Nor is Lent a 40 day self-help program in which we pick ourselves up by our bootstraps, brush ourselves off, and make late New Year resolutions to live a radically changed and more spiritual and holy life. The focus of Lent is not on us, but on the mercy of our LORD and God.

And the mercy of our LORD is this: that in spite of our sin, in spite of what we deserve, the curse of death no longer holds sway over His creation. For our God *"...is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm."* He loves the unlovable and those who hate Him. He relented from doing harm to you and instead did harm to His SON in order to spare you from the wrath of His judgment, in order to cancel the power of the curse of death through JESUS' innocent Blood.

So we treasure and honor our LORD's sacrifice. We received it in Baptism and continue to receive it in His Supper and His Word of forgiveness in holy Absolution. This is truly the treasure of Heaven on which we are to rely, for in these we receive the life JESUS gave on Calvary in our place. In these are life, His life, given to us to erase the curse of death and the grave. These treasures are given to be our hearts' desire. These truly are the treasures that neither moth nor rust destroys.

Therefore, the ashes you wear also confess another truth, a greater truth. The ashes placed on your forehead are no longer only a confession of the fall of creation and the curse of death. They confess, even more loudly, the life we have in the innocent suffering, death, and resurrection of JESUS. Placed upon you in the sign of the Cross they symbolize the life now found in what was once an instrument of death. The ashes indicate what you have escaped through our LORD's grace and mercy—the curse of eternal death and the grave.

The ashes then, are also a sign of what will be on the Last Day. For is not our confession that we believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come? And what does this mean other than, *“On the Last Day the HOLY SPIRIT will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in CHRIST eternal life,”* (Luther's explanation to the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed) We will be raised from the dust of the grave, our bodies alive with the SPIRIT breathed into them by CHRIST Himself. For JESUS is *“...the resurrection and the life. He who believes in [Him,] though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in [Him] shall never die.”*

So, do not dwell on the curse, but let the ashes of this day remind you of what the LORD JESUS has promised He will do, *“...transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.”* Easter, then, is the sum total of this day. Easter is coming! JESUS 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 from the dust of your grave speaks these words to you: *“Arise, for I have forgiven you all your sins.”*

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

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