

Pastor's Sermon
Ash Wednesday

March 5, 2025

A Little Dab of Ash One of my favorite quotes is "For peace of mind, resign as general manager of the universe." Good advice. It keeps me in my place, gives me perspective. It is excellent wisdom that provides a theme for this day, Ash Wednesday.

For 1400 years, people have been invited forward to receive a little dab ash mixed with olive oil. We call it the Imposition of Ashes. Many people see this as a big imposition. For many years it was a symbol of what separated Roman Catholics from other Christians. As a child I would ask why we called the day Ash Wednesday if there was nothing to do with ashes in the service. Since the 1970's, ashes have become the norm for us this day.

The sign of the cross is imposed upon our forehead. The ash reminds us of who we are and whose we are. We belong to Christ. The Cross reminds us of our Baptism. "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."

As we do this, we submit our resignation as general manager of the universe by confessing that we are but hourly workers in God's creation. The ashes remind us that we are temporary, living day to day, hour to hour, minute to minute, never knowing the day or hour when our last breath will come. In the blink of an eye. The ashes remind us that we belong to a decaying, dying, temporal world. One day, everything we are, everything we possess, will be but dust and ashes. The ashes remind us we that we are not immortal. We are not perfect. We are not fireproof. Above all, we are not God.

When the fires of temptation test us, our righteousness turns to ashes. When the flames of adversity strike us, our strength turns to ashes. When the fingers of death take away ones that we love, our hope turns into ashes. When tragedy ignites all around us, our joy turns into ashes. Recently deceased Christian author Tony Campolo once wrote of he what called the "Potato Salad Promise": Young people, you may not think you're going to die, but you are. One of these days, they'll take you to the cemetery, drop you into a hole, throw some dirt on your face, and go back to the church and eat potato salad."

Tonight we admit that we are but dust and ashes, words echo God's word to Adam in Genesis 3. In the Garden of Eden the man and the woman were tested. "When you eat of this fruit, you will be like God!" After they failed the test, God reminds them who they are, "Remember you are dust and to dust you will return."

Tonight we begin the season of Lent, the annual time of reflection upon the meaning of our lives, who we are and who we are not. We are not the general managers of the universe and we turn to the One who is. Lent is a time for repentance. It is not a time of groveling in our sinfulness, feeling sorry for our wrongdoing. Repentance is turning 180 degrees and moving in a completely different direction. It is a time to remember who we are. Repentance is more than giving up our bad habits; it is a time to adopt a new world view, God's view. Lent is a time to confess our sinfulness and to begin again, heading in a different direction, celebrating that our God not only allows u-turns, but also rejoices in them.

The ash on our foreheads is not just a smudge. The ash is imposed in the sign of the Cross, the sign of God's victory and promise. It is the sign of the promise that God will not throw us out like dust gathered in a dustpan. It is the sign of the promise that as the baptized people of God, we are joined to Christ's death and resurrection. It is the sign of the promise that God won't leave us to drown in our sinfulness, but jumps in to rescue us. The Cross reminds us whose we are. We are children of God; we belong to Christ's family.

As we move through the season of Lent, we move to the Cross AND BEYOND. We are bought and paid for by Christ. Our sinfulness put Christ on the cross. We humans just don't like having God around. We would rather do things our way. The Cross is a reminder about how we would rather do away with God. Jesus is God-with-us, God-in-the flesh. The Cross is a reminder that God will not let us drown in our rebellious ways, our sin. God raised Jesus from the dead. The end of that story changes this mournful day into a day of joy. We are renewed, refined, refocused by the power of our loving God who will not leave us alone.

Left on our own, we destroy it all. A quick look at the daily news shows that clearly. But God is with us. That little dab of ash in the shape of the Cross is a great imposition on the way we do things. Remember, you are dust and to dust you shall return. Remember that you are not the general manager of the universe. The One who is has come to change the end of our story, bringing new life out of dead ashes. Thanks be to God. Now is the day of salvation!