**The Dust and Ashes of a Fallen Creation**

**Ash Wednesday**

**Genesis 3:19**

Our text for meditation is Genesis 3:19… By the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; For you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” So far our text

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Those of us gathered together here today — along with the Christian Church everywhere—begins the season of Lent. There is a marked difference in the Divine Service for this evening—most especially those who will consider the name of the day, and participate in the Rite of Imposition of Ashes/… you will with the harsh words of our Lord to His fallen Adam: You are dust, and to dust you shall return (Gn 3:19).

We know the context of these words. It was in the garden of Eden where God confronted Adam, Eve, and Satan after the incident with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Our Triune God spoke to them right after Adam and Eve had fallen into sin and had brought sin and death into the creation, and into our lives.

On that day it began that the serpent will be our enemy and crawl on its belly and eat dust all its days.

But that is not all, the world will also be our enemy only yielding thorns and thistles for our toilsome labor all the days of our lives—tempting us to blame God’s creation, or even God Himself when things go poorly.

Even our own flesh is our enemy, from that day it is subject to sin, decay, and death. You are dust, and to dust you shall return.

It does not help that we are forced to be so focused in on ourselves at this time and consequently on our sin and death. This past Sunday we put the Alleluia to sleep so to speak. Our ears will not be blessed to hear that word throughout Lent. We are left in the ashes and dust of sin and death—without a glimpse of heaven, nor even a sound of that angelic chorus. It is as if the doors of heaven have been closed to us—shut tight—and we are cast out of paradise. We are forced to sit in sackcloth and in the ashes of fallen creation—even though we really do not want to.

Tonight and throughout Lent we are left with ourselves. We are shut out of the light. We sit in the darkness of our sin and our impending death. The majesty of heaven is out of our reach—not that we could ever grasp it by our own reason or strength.

We can see the Cross, in fact we are focused upon it, but we cannot yet see beyond it. A wall has been placed around Mount Zion so that we are not allowed to approach the majesty of God, much less to go inside the curtain to the Holy of Holies and behold the Mercy Seat of God. We are not yet allowed to do so, not until Easter.

But it is good for us to be here, to be in the season of Lent, at least for 40 days. It is not the same good as when the disciples beheld the Savior’s Transfiguration upon the Mount. It is a different good. We need a time in our busy lives of plenty here on earth to recognize the reality of our own sin. It is good to feel the emptiness of our living death apart from repentance and faith and Christ.

We need this extended time with our Lord in the wilderness as it were—that we might learn from Him that man really does not live by bread alone. We do not live by the sweat of our own brow in the physical realm … but on every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God as we shall hear on Sunday in our Gospel lesson (Mt 4:4).

We need to truly understand that it is not the mere outward existence—the external fasting and weeping and mourning (Joel 2:12) that avails before God—but the rending of the heart, as our Old Testament Lesson declares to us. What God desires of us all, are the true sacrifices of a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart (Ps 51:17), just as David, by divine inspiration, teaches us in his Psalm of Repentance, and our Introit for this day.

We need to sit in sackcloth and ashes – not to be seen by men – but for ourselves. That is what our Savior would teach us in our Holy Gospel Lesson for this evening. Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven (Mt 6:1). But, oh how difficult this is for us.

We are “show-boaters” because of our sinful, prideful flesh. Our sinful flesh likes attention! We want the recognition of people. We would like to hear the trumpet sounding and the oohs and aahs of impressed onlookers – even if it might only be our closest family or our own left hand.

Our flesh would even try to impress God, and we at the very least likes to think that it has truly done so. God’s favor does not come in that way, it is not somehow granted because God is impressed by or is rewarding our meager works. In fact, it is not even a reward, to speak precisely, brought on by of our repentance.

God’s favor is always – and only – because of Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, Who for the joy set before Him endured the Cross, scorning its shame (Heb 12:2) as recorded in Hebrews. It is always and only because God made Him Who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2Cor 5:21) as St. Paul was spirit-moved to write in his second letter to the church in Corinth.

It is only on Christ’s behalf, for the sake of Christ, that the heavenly Father implores us through His prophets, apostles, and pastors: be reconciled to God. Know Him alone as your Lord and God and Savior from sin. Fear, love, and trust in Him above all things—that only in Christ are we reconciled to God the Father. Only in Christ do we live in the time of His favor. Only in Christ will the Lord spare us and take pity on His people (Joel 2:17, 18). Only in Christ is the day of salvation (2 Cor 6:2).

Ash Wednesday and Lent teaches us to number our days, to recognize our sin and weaknesses, to see the end of this fleeting life, and to note that the angel of death is always at our door—and there is nothing we can do either to create or to preserve life on our own.

Ash Wednesday and Lent would cause us to recognize and take seriously that which we wish we could avoid in the daily news – that is, the death and decay all around us because of sin, including the sin in our own lives. The creation has fallen. That which was God created and declared very good (Gn 1:31) is corrupt, and that includes each of us. And we are hopeless to fix it.

Christ is our only hope! He always has been, and He always will be. Lent makes us see that all the more clearly. For Christ is the great Restorer of His fallen creation—having reconciled all things to Himself by His Incarnation and His Cross. It is why God moved St. Paul to write to the church at Rome: For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him Who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope. (Rom 8:19–24)

Perhaps nothing sums up the purpose and theme of Lent better than The Collect for Ash Wednesday—which will be prayed during every mid-week Divine Service throughout the Lenten Season:

Almighty and everlasting God, because You hate nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent, create in us new and contrite hearts that we, worthily repenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain from You, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness.

As we begin this holy, penitential season of Lent, we do so knowing that despite The Dust and Ashes of the Fallen Creation we live in, we have a most certain hope. Christ’s Work of Creation and Re-Creation will win the day. In fact, Christ’s work of creation and Re-creation already has won the day – for you, and all His repentant saints.

Praised be to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. [Amen]