

“THE GOOD NEWS OF ASH WEDNESDAY”

Genesis 3:8-19; 1 Corinthians 15:21-26, 42b-50

A Sermon by John Thomason

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I never ceased to be amazed by the prominence of Ash Wednesday services in the Church today. Earlier this week I inquired about the observance of Ash Wednesday in one of our neighboring congregations, the Prince of Peace Parish, which serves Roman Catholics in both Woodbury and Bethlehem. I learned that Prince of Peace offers not one, not two, but three Ash Wednesday services to accommodate the crowds who attend each year. However, the allure of Ash Wednesday is not just a Catholic phenomenon. This observance is much more common in mainline Protestant churches than it was a few decades ago. The turnout may be relatively small in our own church, but faithful members attend this service every year and find it to be very meaningful. Your presence tonight is a sign that Ash Wednesday has enduring appeal – in some churches, even growing appeal.

This trend is surprising to me because Ash Wednesday literally hits us in the forehead with a message that you and I don’t particularly like to hear. Stop and think about it: most of us aspire to be in control of our lives; we seek to be financially secure; we rely on doctors and hospitals to help us live long, healthy lives. A lot of us even aspire to be good people. We watch Dr. Phil on TV, or read self-help books, or work out at Planet Fitness, or go to Weight Watchers, or participate in a Bible study class here at church. We try to “be all we can be”; we even try to be good Christians – and then, along comes Ash Wednesday to bring us back down to earth.

The message of Ash Wednesday is: you and I are only flawed, finite creatures after all. Our behavior is considerably less than perfect and our bodies are not meant to last forever. We can sanctify ourselves until we become candidates for sainthood, but we still sin and fall short of the glory of God. We can eat right, exercise regularly, and go for annual mammograms or prostate exams. We can acquire enough health insurance to help us handle almost any medical catastrophe. But all our efforts to prolong our lives will ultimately fail. We can stockpile an abundance of money and property, but then we die and can’t take any of it with us. This is the bad news of Ash Wednesday. Why would any of us in our right mind want to come to a worship service that bears such a grim message?

This message comes through most clearly, of course, during the actual imposition of the ashes. The sign of the cross is placed on our foreheads as reminder of our sinfulness, and at that same moment, we hear a sobering reminder of our mortality: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.” This is a direct quote from the creation story in Genesis 3, where we read that the first man is fashioned out of the dust of the ground. In short order, the specter of sin enters the picture. The man disobeys God by eating the forbidden fruit and then dodges responsibility by pointing the finger of blame at his female partner. As a consequence, God declares that the man will endure hardship throughout his life and then face the chilling certainty of death. God says, “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:9).

Notice that the writer of Genesis makes a direct connection between sin and death – a fact that doesn't escape the attention of the apostle Paul. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he reminds his readers that "death came through a human being." that "all die in Adam" (1 Corinthians 15:21a, 22a). "As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust" (v. 48) – and Paul is not just talking about people who live out in the desert; he's referring to yours truly; he's referring to you.

This dark message runs throughout the Bible, appearing in a variety of metaphors. But none is more pointed than this: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return" – the words you and I hear when the ashes are imposed on our foreheads. Perhaps it would be more fitting to say that our noses get rubbed in the ashes. On Ash Wednesday, you and I are forced to hear the bad news about ourselves: we may be the very picture of health tonight, but our condition is still terminal.

Do you ever wonder why we put ourselves through this – in many cases, year after year? What is the value of being reminded on an annual basis that we are mortal, that our days are fleeting and numbered, that we are here today and gone tomorrow?

Certainly one benefit of this exercise is that it teaches us how to value every day of life God gives us. Not knowing how much time we have left encourages us to make the most of the time we have. I once went on a religious retreat where participants were asked to reflect on the way each of us used our time. The first question was, "What would you choose to do or do differently if you knew that you had only one year to live?" I realized from the answer I wrote that I don't always use my time to address matters that are of the greatest importance to me. I tend to live as if I will live forever, with no sense of urgency to attain my highest goals in life. Well, after answering that first question, we were then confronted with another: "What would you choose to do or do differently if you knew that you had only one month to live?" I could feel the screws tightening and my sense of urgency increase. At that point I had to narrow my priorities and focus on the relationships and activities that were most significant to me. But then, to heighten the tension, this exercise continued: "What would you do or do differently if you knew that you had only one day to live?" – and finally, "if you had only one hour to live?"

Why is it that you and I don't live life to the fullest each and every day? Why is it that we postpone doing what we need to do to make our lives more productive and useful, that we put off saying the things we really need to say to the people we care about the most? Isn't it partly because we think we still have tomorrow, or next year, or another decade in which to do it? To cut to the chase, isn't it because we live in a state of denial about death – more specifically, our own death? Ash Wednesday can benefit us in this regard because it shatters the illusion that we have all the time in the world: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return."

These words do have a way of challenging our grandiosity, cutting us down to size, and keeping us humble. But they are not meant to humiliate us. When we look carefully at the passages of Scripture that remind us of our mortality, we find that they are not intended to belittle us, much less destroy our human dignity. They are in fact affirmations of how much you and I are worth to God.

When the psalmist speaks of the fleetingness of human life, it's in the context of his talking about the faithfulness of God. "As a father has compassion for his children," he says, "so

the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust. As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him. . .” (Psalm 103:13b-17). The psalmist’s point is not that our lives are worthless because they are only temporary; his point is that God knows our lives are fragile and fleeting, so God loves us with a love that will not let us go, a love that will never end.

The apostle Paul voices a similar perspective in 1 Corinthians 15. Yes, he says, “death came through a human being”; but “the resurrection of the dead also comes through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (vv. 21-22). “The first man,” Paul says, “was from the earth, a man of dust; [but] the second man is from heaven . . . Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven” (vv. 47, 49). Do you hear it? Paul doesn’t wish to put human beings down because we originated from dust and will one day disintegrate into dust. To the contrary, he wants to build us up with the assurance that death is not the end.

Some of you have heard me refer to the death of my cousin, Hal Ingraham, back in 1976. At the age of 17, Hal was killed in a tractor accident on his family farm in Franklin, Tennessee. To be honest with you, I was inconsolable with grief when I attended his funeral. It fell on the 4th of July, and I was in no mood to celebrate that day. Hal and I were more like brothers than cousins; he had most of his life still out ahead of him; and I thought of his premature death as a tragic waste.

But over time, I reclaimed the biblical promise that nothing is ever wasted in the providence of God. The turning point for me came when I revisited the farm for the first time after Hal’s death. He was buried behind the family home in a cemetery that dated back to the Civil War. I walked up to his headstone and discovered that the engraving on it contained more than Hal’s name, birth date, and death date. The grave marker also included a quote from a scene described in the 16th chapter of Mark’s Gospel. On Easter morning, three women go to Jesus’ tomb and, to their great astonishment, find it empty. A young man, presumably an angel, is seated in the tomb and says to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here” (Mark 16:6). That was the quote engraved on Hal’s headstone: “He has been raised; he is not here.” And I realized that the reference was not just to Jesus, but to Hal.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.” These words remind us that our days are numbered in this life. But along with the bad news of Ash Wednesday, don’t neglect to hear the good news: Christ lived and died and was raised from the dead to insure that dust is not our final destiny. Thanks be to God!