

## Ash Wednesday

### Dust You Are...To Dust You Will Return!

#### Gen 2:4-7; Gen 3:17-19 Selected Verses from Ecclesiastes

On this *Ash Wednesday* we must begin our *Lenten Walk* by acknowledging, what most of often refuse to admit: **Death is the fate of all men...and women.** No amount of exercise, drugs, medical science, cosmetic surgery or make-up can prevent the inevitable.

People often get anxious about getting older. King Solomon speaks wisely on this very issue: *"...banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are meaningless...Naked a man comes from his mother's womb...As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain?"* We have become a culture that denies the severity of God's punishment for sin. We, in fact, voice our disapproval of God's remedy for sin...death and eternal punishment...Funeral rites have become nothing more than eulogies that shout of the success the deceased earned through his own perspiration and wits.

**"To Adam, God said, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it, CURSED IS THE GROUND BECAUSE OF YOU; THROUGH PAINFUL TOIL YOU WILL EAT OF IT ALL THE DAYS OF YOUR LIFE. IT WILL PRODUCE THORNS AND THISTLES FOR YOU AND YOU WILL EAT THE PLANTS OF THE FIELD. BY THE SWEAT OF YOUR BROW YOU WILL EAT YOUR FOOD UNTIL YOU RETURN TO THE GROUND...SINCE FROM IT YOU WERE TAKEN; FOR DUST YOU ARE AND TO DUST YOU WILL RETURN.'"**

The sentence upon A-dom (*Dust Man*) was grave and, would effect all mankind due to our common guilt. **"...here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His Commandments, for this is the whole duty of man...For God will bring every deed of a man into judgment."** You see, A-Dom's sin has spread to all of God's creation. When we break a Divine Command we set ourselves above the Maker of Heaven and Earth. God, in turn, demands death as payment for this malevolent transgression. God knows that death is the only way to get man's attention...to have him realize that his own nature, devoid of God, is, in fact, worthless. *"For the wise man, like the fool, will not long be remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man will die."*

It is amazing how quick a man decomposes...even while he still draws breath. Sure, we can joke about aging, but I often wonder why we just don't admit that our days are numbered...that we are not self-made, but are rather that *"...the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life...Dust you are and to Dust you will return."*

Jews bury their dead in plain, unvarnished, plain pine boxes, held together by wooden pegs...no handles or other ornamentation...save the *Star of David* carved into the portion where the head resides. The body is wrapped, as was our Lord's, in white- linen shrouds. The coffin, after being lowered into the grave-site by straps held by the pall-bearers, is then buried while all who wish to be are in attendance. The mourners pray: *"Lord may this body be returned to You...for You alone gave it life."*

**"I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all. Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come..."**

We hear every Lenten season, through God's Word, the drumbeat of the march to the grave. It always brings us to our knees at the foot of the Cross.

**"The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you**

**must not eat from the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil*, for when you eat of it you will surely die.'"**

Man, of his own *free will*, gave-up a vital connection with his Maker. God's full wrath is here revealed. **"From dust you came...to dust you shall return."** Why was man not stricken dead in the hour of his disobedience? Well, God is merciful, long-suffering with His children...affording them a space in time where they might repent of their sins and glorify His name. So what is asked of us? **"Fear God and keep His Commandments, for this is the duty of man."**

Eventually in death, we are reduced to a small amount of material. Jeff Hobbs, owner of *Hobbs Funeral Home* in South Portland, once remarked to me, **"Without a soul,"** Jeff said, **"there's not much to man."** Jeff Hobbs is a great theologian. **"...the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."**

We are all *A-dom*...God breathed life into our bodies...life that gives us a soul that will survive the flesh...flesh, that if left to God's course, will return to the dust. I often ask God why I have failed so miserably in communicating this fact...that it's the soul and its final destination that matters.

How is the worth of a man to be judged? Is it by his house...car...clothes...toys...bank-account...c-gars or the quality of his scotch? We seem to believe our worth, somehow, rests on our man's opinion...what they think of us. Yet we all eventually turn to dust **"Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything, under the sun...everything, without faith in God, is meaningless...For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and in the process forfeits his very soul?"**

**"To the man who pleases God, He gives wisdom and knowledge...The sinner, the one who turns away, God allows him to have pleasure in his folly only to finally realize that his gathering of wealth and pleasure is meaningless...a chasing after the wind."**

Most of us will not be long remembered...Contrary to what we think, the world will get along just fine without our expertise. The Psalmist sings the final verse of the hymn titled *"Earthly Life"*: **"All came from Dust and all shall return to Dust."** Here, God's Own voice declares the equality of sinful man...Unlike our earthly pretense, death acknowledges that one person's dust is no better than the other's. Here, the world gives up its illusion.

A reformation theologian once said **"If those God has formed reject His image...on the Last Day He will acknowledge them only as dust to be brushed from His feet. He will ask, 'Where is your crown of thorns?...Where is your Cross? Where are the nail marks in your hands? Did the world scourge you...reject you...Did it hate you because you bore witness to Me?'"**

*Ash Wednesday* marks the beginning of *Lent*...a time that places special emphasis on the bitter sufferings of our *Lord's Passion*...a *Passion*, that man, on his own, refuses to acknowledge...because to acknowledge it necessitates personally picking up a cross and following Him.

*Lent* is a time set aside, by Christians, to examine their lack of commitment to Jesus in relationship to His total devotion to mankind...*Lent* is a time for the followers of the Christ to inspect every detail of their lives...*Lent* is the time to hear Jesus cry out to His Father from a Cross draped in His Blood.

**Smitten...Stricken...Afflicted...Forsaken...Pierced for our transgressions...crushed for our iniquities...The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him...The Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all.**

We get uncomfortable looking at our Lord on the cross. Here is our King, our savior, nails tearing His flesh. Blood flowing from His side. It is often very difficult for us to acknowledge the price He paid for our sins.

It is a shame, but true, *A-dom's* descendants, for the most part, have bought into the Big Lie: **"Your eyes will be opened. You will be like God."** The *Dust-Man* is convinced: **"I am God! I can do no wrong. I**

*claim deliverance by the very curse that Yahweh placed on me. I will earn salvation by the sweat of my brow."*

*"Dust you are, and to Dust...you will return."*

*"...just as through one man sin entered, and death through sin...if by the transgression of one many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift of grace of one Man, Jesus Christ abound in many..."*

The ashes that have been placed on our foreheads this night symbolize the dirt of humiliation wrought by sin...Ashen crosses on our foreheads stand as a pronouncement to the world that we are equals...that our insincere apologies to the Christ, and to one another count for nothing.

Before you depart the sanctuary this evening pause in silent reverence...**Look at Him Who hangs on the Cross**...and then, look with compassion upon your brothers and sisters...Look at the crosses they wear...**Love them as ones marked by Jesus' suffering and death...Love them through no will of your own, but only because Christ died for them!**

*Ashes on our foreheads tell the world that we are beneficiaries of a future that lies just beyond the perceived finality of a grave...The "Cross of Ashes" on our foreheads indicate the reality of sin, emptiness, loneliness, and death in this world. Marked by *Christ the Crucified*...it is here...in Word and Sacrament ministry, our cries to live with God in Heaven are answered...in Jesus' name.*

Lent is a time of renewal for us, a time to stop turning away from God. The old practice of the church was to ask of us to give up something for Lent. If we are to give something up in thanksgiving for the price Christ paid on the cross, then let us give up ourselves, to Him. AMEN