

Ash Wednesday: Ashes and Truth

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] Good evening. Glad we could be here together. Let's pray.

Our Heavenly Father, at the close of this day, we gather here because you're a God who promises to be in our midst and to speak through your word.

And that's a word that we long to hear, that we are desperate to hear. And so we pray that you would honor your promise and speak. In your son's name, amen.

Well, I'm truly glad to be here together. I know it's an odd thing to say, but I'm actually a big fan of Ash Wednesday. I love this service.

And it's an odd service to love, but there are some things about it that I feel like every time of year when we get to this service, I feel the same way.

[1 : 05] And I essentially feel like, man, I really need this. And I hope some of you understand what I'm talking about. I wanted to take a few minutes just to think a little bit and reflect a little bit on the meaning of what we're about to do.

At Church of the Advent, we don't want to ever do anything that we don't understand. And so we want to make sure we understand what's going to happen. In just a little while, Dan's going to invite you to come by rows up front.

And you're going to come just like we take communion on Sundays, except for instead of bread and wine, we're going to take a little bit of ash mixed with a little bit of tea tree oil.

And we're going to use our thumb. And in the best technique we have, we're going to put a little smudge on your forehead in the shape of a cross. And I want to reflect a little bit on why we do this. You know, because some people say, well, you know, Jesus says clearly in Scripture that when we fast, we shouldn't display our fasting so that everybody knows what we're doing, that we should do it in secret.

[2 : 09] So why would we do something like this and go against Scripture? And I would say if this is an act that you think is a way of displaying our faithfulness, that might be a misunderstanding of what this occasion is about.

Other people think that we put the ashes on our foreheads and then it's a time to act very sad and sort of hang our heads and be very somber. And I would say if you're focusing on that aspect of it, that's also probably a mischaracterization.

The easiest way to think about it is this, is that the ashes are a way of telling the truth. The ashes tell the truth. And Ash Wednesday is all about telling the truth.

And I don't know about you, but in my life, if I'm honest, I find it very easy to avoid hard truth, to deny it, to pretend like it isn't there, to look the other way and to minimize it and to go on with my life.

It's very easy to do that. But if you have a visible reminder on your forehead, and on the foreheads of all of your friends and loved ones and your kids, it's a lot harder to deny or avoid those hard truths.

[3 : 27] The ashes tell the truth. And I want to lay out a couple of ways I believe these ashes will tell the truth this evening. The first is this, that the ashes tell the truth about us.

It's interesting. There's a bioethicist named George Annas, who once referred to America as having a death-denying culture that cannot accept death as anything but defeat.

Now, when we put the ashes on your forehead, we're going to say certain words. We're going to say, From dust you have come, and to dust you shall return.

Now, it's interesting to say those words in a culture like this George Annas person is describing. We live in a culture that denies the reality of dust.

We deny the reality of death. We spend millions of dollars fighting it. Billions of dollars fighting it, right? We hate and avoid anything that even reminds us of aging, much less death, right?

[4 : 37] And we worship and idealize youth culture and youthful beauty. That is the pinnacle of human existence in our culture, is youth and beauty.

We hate death. And yet, when we put ashes on our forehead, we're telling the truth. We're telling a very hard truth. That at some point, could be this year, could be 50 years from now, but at some point, the day will come when you will die.

When I will die. You know, it's interesting. I was writing and thinking and reflecting and actually writing these very words a couple of days ago when I was in the hospital. And my wife had gone in to get a comparatively minor surgical procedure and it required local anesthesia.

And I was waiting and she was in the surgery room and she came out and everything seemed okay. And I had just written those words, death comes to us all, right?

And I put my stuff down and I say, how you doing? And she comes in and she looks all right. And all of a sudden, her body arches, her eyes roll back in her head and her blood pressure and her heart rate just drop to nothing.

[5 : 52] And all of a sudden, I'm pushed out of the way and all these people flood in. They say, what's going on? What's going on? They start putting stuff in her IV and this and that. And I had this moment. Now, it turned out everything was fine. Thankfully, I can say, it's no big deal at all.

But I had a moment where I thought, are you really doing this, God? Is this happening right now? Just a moment, fraction of a second.

And luckily that time, everything was fine. But you know, at some point, that moment is going to come. And it will be that moment, right? Is this really happening now?

Is this really happening now? And the answer will be yes, it's happening right now. Right, that moment's going to come. From dust we have come and to dust we will one day return, right?

And then as we think about telling the truth, even as we contemplate the truth of death, death is actually a symptom that points to an even deeper, more serious truth. Death is just a symptom that points to the deeper reality and truth of sin.

[7 : 00] Right, the very fact of death proves sin. Why? Because sin is essentially what? It's rebelling and cutting ourselves off from the very source of life.

And it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that if you cut yourself off from the source of life, the clock starts ticking. It's a matter of time, right? Decay sets in.

Entropy sets in. But just like our culture denies death, it makes perfect sense that our culture would also deny and minimize the reality of sin.

Right? Because they go together. If you deny one, you're very likely to deny the other. And so we live in a culture where, what do we do? We spend most of our time and energy trying to project a version of ourselves out there, right?

To our employers and to our coworkers and to our friends and even to our family and even to ourselves. And we put this version of ourselves out there. You know, this idealized version.

[7 : 59] And we try to convince people that we're beautiful and that we're important and that we're worthy and that we're competent and that we're all these things. Right? We try to convince people that we're this person.

And we even try to convince ourselves that we're that person. But frankly, I don't know about you, but sometimes I just feel like that's exhausting. That's exhausting. Constantly trying to convince people of all of these virtues.

You just get to a point where you're sick of it. Maybe it's because I'm on the verge of 40. I don't know. Maybe I've been doing it so long that I'm just tired of it. But you just get tired of it. So we put ashes on our head and we tell the truth.

We tell the truth. Here's the truth. I'm not the person that you think I am. I'm not even the person that I'd like to think that I am.

You know? You take the collar off, the cross, the fancy shirt. And the truth is, this is what the ashes say.

[9 : 04] Even if I won't, the ashes will tell you that I'm a far worse sinner than I would ever dare admit to you. And I'm a far worse sinner than I would ever dare admit, even to myself.

And I'm a far worse sinner even than I would even dare imagine. And yet the ashes tell the truth. Even if I remain silent, the ashes will tell you that's who he is.

That sounds depressing. And people think about that and they think, well, Ash Wednesday, and that's kind of a downer time of year. But frankly, as I said before, and maybe this is kind of why I like Ash Wednesday, I don't think it's depressing.

I think it's refreshing. Finally, you can take off the facade, you can drop the persona, you can cut out the act, you don't have to keep pretending anymore.

You just put the ashes on and you tell the truth to the world. This is who I am. I'm not who you think I am. The ashes tell the truth that we're worse than we ever dared to admit.

[10:05] And that's the first way that they tell the truth. They tell the truth about us, that we die and we die because we sin. But then if you'll also notice when we put the ashes on our foreheads, we put them as best we can in the shape of a cross and that also points to one more truth.

The ashes not only tell the truth about us, the ashes also tell the truth about God. And this is the truth that they tell about God. That God loves you more than you ever dared hope.

He loves you more than you ever dared hope. Right? Because what is the cross? The cross shows us this, that God loves you.

And when you turn your back on him and cut him out of your life, he says that he would rather suffer and die himself to be able to forgive you so that you can live with him for eternity.

He would rather do that than anything else. In fact, it was the only option available because of his love. It's the only thing that he would consider doing. And so the ashes tell that truth, the truth of our love.

[11:17] So these are the two powerful truths that collide in the ashes on your forehead. One, the truth about you, right? And this is as the late Jack Miller used to say, he used to say, cheer up.

You're much worse than you would ever dare imagine. And God loves you more than you could ever dare hope. And those two realities exist together in the ashes.

And so the implications, I'll just consider one. In order for these truths to collide in your life, the truth about you, and the truth about God's love for you, it requires that we tell the truth.

And that's why we're here. It requires that we admit it. That we actually admit that we need that love and mercy. Right? What does Jesus say in Matthew chapter 9? He says, those who are well don't need a physician.

It's those who are sick. I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners. Right? He's saying, admit it. You're not fooling anybody.

[12:21] Right? God knows the truth about you. Your closest loved ones suspect the truth about you if they don't know it already. And guess what?

They deserve to know the truth about you. So who are you fooling? Jesus is saying, admit it. Admit that you need. Admit that you're weak. Admit that you need mercy. And I will give it to you, but you need to admit it.

You need to tell the truth. Because we have in ourselves this powerful temptation to self-justify. Right? To justify ourselves. To minimize and rationalize and intellectualize away all of our faults.

Not a big deal. Not a big deal. Not a big deal. And it's that self-justification that destroys our relationship with God and one another. Listen, self-justification is like acid to relationships.

It's like acid. There's a book written by a couple of social psychologists and the title of the book is Mistakes Were Made But Not By Me. And here's what they say about marriage.

[13:22] They studied all these couples that got divorced and they asked the question, what is it that leads happily married couples ultimately to get divorced? What are the things that happened? And here's what they found.

The vast majority of couples who drift apart do so slowly over time in a snowballing pattern of blame and self-justification. Each partner focuses on what the other one is doing wrong while justifying his or her own preferences, attitudes, and ways of doing things.

From our standpoint, therefore, misunderstandings, conflicts, personality differences, and even angry quarrels are not the assassins of love. self-justification is.

Self-justification is like acid to our relationships. And if it does that to our human relationships, imagine what it does to our relationship with God.

It renders it impossible. You cannot have a relationship with God if you are bent on justifying yourself. So this Lent, I don't know what you're giving up.

[14:26] Chocolate or sweets or booze or caffeine or white carbs or Whole30 or, you know, Netflix. I don't know what you're giving up. But whatever else you're doing, I would just humbly suggest that

you also give up self-justification.

See what that does to your relationships with one another and see what that does to your relationship with God. Just give it up.

So let's come up here, let's put on these ashes, and let's tell the truth. Let's pray. Let's pray.