

Remembering Death

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[0:00] Amen. So we're told in our psalm appointed for today that the Lord knows our frame.

He remembers that we are dust. Now, that shouldn't come as a surprise that he remembers that.

He is, of course, the one who created us out of dust. But he remembers.

He knows our frailty. And he has compassion on those who fear him. But here's a question I want us to consider today.

Do we remember that we are dust? Now, in a few moments, we're going to have the imposition of ashes. And does anyone remember, off the top of your head, what words are used at the imposition?

That's right. Remember that you were dust, and to dust you shall return. Now, that's a little bit uncomfortable, isn't it? Well, I certainly, if I didn't think that it was uncomfortable before, having become a priest as well as a dad, imposing ashes on the forehead of my little girl and saying that to her is certainly uncomfortable.

[1:47] Now, it can be uncomfortable because human beings, by nature, don't seem to like to think about death. And that's particularly true of 21st century Westerners.

We live in a culture that tries to insulate itself from the reality of death. We do everything that we can to avoid death and to even avoid thinking about death.

We even do our best to deny and ignore the reality of aging. Now, when we might be tempted to think about it and actually reflect for a moment, we can always go buy more stuff to make us feel young and immortal and distract us.

But, no matter how hard we fight it, we can fight it as hard as we possibly can, we're all returning to the grave, and that is just the truth.

We try our best to protect ourselves from it, but the reality of the matter is this. We are dust, and we will return to dust, and it could happen to any of us at any moment.

[2:54] We're kidding ourselves if we think that it can't happen to us and that it could happen at any time. Now, if I ever had any doubt about that, I certainly don't anymore.

As most of you know, I was involved in something of an unusual and frankly terrifying car accident last month. For those who haven't heard the play-by-play account of what happened, here it is.

Typical weekday afternoon. I was returning home from a meeting here at the church, pulled into my driveway like I always do, put the van in park, shut off the ignition, and got out.

Now, for some reason that the mechanics still can't explain or duplicate, the van came out of park and started rolling down the driveway. I happened to be in the way.

The open door hit me, knocked me over, pinned me underneath it, and managed to drag me several feet out into the road. I ended up with severe bruising, in addition to having bruising and damaged cartilage in my ribs.

[4:01] But, all that said, I was blessed. That was a freak accident that easily could have killed me. Now, I gave you the details of what happened for a reason.

To point out that in so many ways, the accident that could have, that accident could have resulted in a crushed head, or crushed internal organs, and could have ended my life.

It's, in my opinion, nothing short of miraculous that I wasn't more seriously hurt. And I also wanted to point out that this was really a freak accident.

It still hasn't been explained. It couldn't have been expected. It happened out of nowhere in the course of the daily routine. Nothing out of the ordinary. Happened out of nowhere. And if I had been killed, as I so easily could have been, I would have departed this life completely without warning. Now, some of us die of old age in our beds. But here's the thing. Some of us won't. And until that moment comes, we have no idea which will be true of us.

[5:11] I'm going to die, and I have no idea when. And that's true of you too. So, the things that we do know, the things that we remember on Ash Wednesday, we are sinners, we are going to die,

and we don't know when that's going to happen.

Now, that being our condition, I want us to think about what we read in Hebrews 9. That it is appointed for each of us to die once, and after that will come the judgment.

In other words, not only will each of us die, each of us will be judged after we die. Think of the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12.

It started in verse 16. Jesus told them a parable saying, The land of a rich man produced plentifully.

And he thought to himself, What shall I do? For I have nowhere to store my crops.

And he said, I will do this. I will tear down my barns, and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years.

[6 : 28] Relax, relax, eat, drink, be merry. But God said to him, Fool, this night your soul is required of you.

And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So is the one who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God. This foolish man thought that he had many years to eat, drink, and be merry, didn't he?

But did he? No sooner than he decides to take satisfaction in his many years to relax, he is confronted with the unavoidable reality of the judgment of God.

We don't seem to have any indication in the text that he was ready. Now that should prompt each of us to ask, are we ready for that moment when it comes?

Do we believe the gospel? Is our faith in Christ? Do we know the hope of the resurrection? I pray that we do, because we're all going to die, and when we die, we're going to be judged, and when we are judged, our only defense will be the righteousness of Christ given to those who trust in him.

[7 : 53] We don't want to depart this life with our only hope being found in the memory of relaxing, eating, drinking, and being merry. Ash Wednesday reminds us of death, and death reminds us of judgment.

The remembrance of death should also remind us of something else, not to waste the time that we have in this life. Now, how much of our time do we spend valuing and pursuing things that, in the perspective of eternity, just don't matter very much?

We're warned against that in our gospel that's appointed for today. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth. Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.

Now, at any moment, the treasures that we have stored up for ourselves on earth can vanish instantly. And that's certainly true at the moment of death.

I have never seen anyone able to take earthly treasures with them when they depart this life. That should prompt us to ask, are we living our lives in light of eternity?

[9 : 13] Are we living as those who know that our heavenly treasure is what will last forever? Or are we clinging to the earthly stuff that we could lose at any moment and putting the other things in our lives before God?

Even those of us who will die in old age still only have a short time in this world. Are we using the time that we have to serve the Lord in gratitude for the grace that he has shown to us and using that time to prepare for eternity?

Ash Wednesday, along with the ashes we are about to receive, gives us some reminders. I want us to receive the ashes today not merely out of habit, but mindfully and intentionally.

In receiving the ashes, we are admitting that we are wretches who desperately need Jesus. We're also taking up the call to repent, to believe the gospel, to put our entire trust in the blood of Jesus shed for us and his resurrection.

And we're accepting the challenge by God's grace to live the remainder of our short time on this earth, not for earthly treasure, but for God and gratitude for the salvation that we have in Jesus.

[10 : 40] The ashes are not meant to be a mere mindless custom. They're not for the purpose of showing everyone that we have been good boys and girls and have gone to church today.

We don't do it just because that's what all the cool kids are doing. Jesus tells us not to practice our righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.

So if that is what we're doing, it's better not to receive the ashes. The ashes are not a sign that we are righteous, that we're properly religious, that we are good. No!

The ashes are a sign to us and an admission that we are dead without Jesus and that he is our only hope.

We are dust. We will return to dust. We are sinners with bodies that are drawing nearer to the grave with every passing moment.

[11 : 39] Now, if I didn't fully grasp that before my car ran over me, I certainly do now. And you know what? It's true for you too, whether you realize it or not.

So what is our hope? We serve a God who delights in showing mercy to sinners and who raises the dead. And that is what he has done and is doing in Jesus.

Do you believe it? That is our hope. The call to remember, to repent, to believe goes out to each one of us today so that we might find forgiveness at the cross and victory over the grave and the risen Lord.

So, remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. And today, repent and believe the gospel. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.