

Ash Wednesday

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[0:00] In a few moments, you will come forward and hear the words, remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

! Those words are not just a poetic exaggeration or liturgical flourish, they are reality.! Ash Wednesday tells the truth.

The truth about who we are. The prophet Joel, as we read this morning, sounds the trumpet in Zion, not to announce a festival, a party.

He sounds the trumpet as a severe warning, an alarm to wake us from our slumber of death before it's too late. Before the day of darkness and gloom, the day of reckoning comes.

And the message from the mouth of the prophet, from the Lord, says this, return to me, says the Lord. Return to me, says the Lord, with all your heart.

[1:09] And that is the question before us today. Martin Luther described fallen humanity with a Latin phrase, in curvatus in se.

It just means this, curved in on oneself. That's how he described our natural state. We're curved in on ourselves. That is our posture.

Our natural posture, apart from grace. That is the natural bent of our fallen nature. We are bent inward. We are curved towards ourselves.

Our thoughts orbit around ourselves. Our fears protect ourselves. Our ambitions exalt ourselves. Even our religion, if we're honest, can be used to serve only ourselves.

This inward curvature cuts us from God. Cuts us off from God. It also cuts us off from one another. It makes true love, true agape love.

[2:22] It makes it impossible. But it was not meant to be so. We were created to look upward and outward. Upward in love and worship to a God, our creator.

Outward in love towards our neighbor. That is the whole law, after all, as Jesus summarizes it. Love the Lord your God. Love your neighbor as yourself.

But sin has folded us inward. We no longer stand upright before God. We collapse towards self-centeredness. And St. James says it plainly.

God resists the proud. But gives grace to the humble. And pride is not merely boastful arrogance in this sense. It's easy to think the proud is those who are boastfully arrogant and walking around a caricature of pride.

But pride is not just merely boastful arrogance. Pride is actually self-curvature. Self-centeredness. It is the instinct to justify ourselves at every bend.

[3:31] It's the instinct to secure ourselves first and foremost. It's the instinct to glorify ourselves. And Ash Wednesday exposes this miserable state that is ours by nature.

In fact, even our prayer book agrees with it. As can be seen in the prayer of committance. When you commit the body to the grave. There's this prayer that says, Man that is born of woman, Had but a short time to live.

And is full of misery. He comes up and is cut down like a flower. He flies it as it were a shadow. And never continues it in one stay.

In the midst of life, We are in death. In the midst of life, We are in death. Now this isn't meant to be morbid spirituality, But clarity.

It's the clarity, It's the reality without any self-delusion or denial. It's essentially saying what we know to be true. We are dust.

[4:41] We are mortal. And worse, Our mortality is bound up with sin. The ashes are not decoration.

They are a confession to ourselves and to the world. And may I encourage you, Even this morning as you begin Lent, And as you go from here, That you let that be the truth.

The ashes are not decoration. They are a confession to ourselves and to the world. About our true state. And Jesus goes on in Matthew 6, And warns against practicing righteousness, To be seen by others.

I want you to notice something in our Lord's warning, In Matthew 6. The warning is there, That even prayer, And fasting, And alms giving.

These are holy things. Even those things, Can be bent inward, To serve ourselves, Rather than serve God, And serve others.

[5:47] Even the repentance, Even the repentance, That we're called to during Lent, Can become self-display, In the Christian life.

This is what Luther called, The difference between, A theology of glory, And a theology of the cross. A theology of glory, Is the one that says, My will is free, To make myself righteous, By my own effort, I can attain right standing before God.

Righteousness is attainable, Through my effort, Through my keeping of holy Lent, My piety, The cross, The cross of Jesus Christ, Is just an inspiring example, Just an inspiring example, To help me succeed.

But a theology of the cross, Says this, Instead, My will, Is bound, In sin.

I cannot help myself, I need help. My righteousness, Is not my own. Salvation comes, Only through Christ crucified.

[7:08] Grace, Is not just a little boost, To get me going, Towards settling the score, Before God. Grace is not just that, That little, 5% I need, To get going.

Grace, Is resurrection. It is total transformation. Grace, Is God, Raising me from the dead, And giving me life. That which I could not do for myself.

And so let, Today, Let this Ash Wednesday, Shatter, Any illusion, Of self glory, You may hold. We, Are not beginning, A six week, Self improvement project.

That's not what Lent is. We are not proving, Our spiritual seriousness. That's not what Lent is. We are not building a case, For our own worthiness. That's not what this is.

That's not what this is. We, Rather, Are confessing, That apart from Christ, We are curved inward, And cannot straighten ourselves up.

[8:15] Only the cross, Only the cross can do that. Only Christ's merit, His obedience, His blood, His resurrection, Can justify us.

Only His spirit, Can sanctify us. Only His mercy, Can glorify us, In the end. So, What is Lent?

God says, Through His prophet, Return to me. Return, Is not self salvation. Return, Is surrender. Utter surrender. Lent, Is the slow, Laborious surrender, Of our inward curve. A reorientation, Of ourselves.

Lent, Is allowing God, To prune us, To humble us, To turn us, Right side up again. Through prayer, He does it through prayer, And through fasting, Yes, He does it through fasting, And through alms giving, Through our generosity, During this season of Lent.

[9:29] God uses all of those means, To turn us right side up. As prayer lifts, Our eyes upward, To God, And away from ourselves. As fasting, Loosens, Our grip, On ourselves, And the trinkets, Of worthiness, That we all dare.

As alms giving, Turns our hands, Outward, To others, In acts of mercy. And these, All of these things, Are not ways, Of earning grace, Before God.

Rather, There are ways, Of placing ourselves, Where God's grace, Can reshape, And refine us. But even these practices, Must be done, With the cross before us.

It must be done, With the cross before us. Because without Christ, Fasting, Becomes, What? Pride. Prayer becomes, Performance.

Alms giving, Becomes, Self congratulation. But with Christ, They become, Instruments, Of reorienting us, To God.

[10:42] That's what the ash, Is all about. It calls us, To remember, Our end. The ashes, Say this, You will die, And stand before your maker, One day.

But, They say that, But they also trace, The shape of a cross, On your forehead. So it is dust, Marked by redemption.

It is death, Claimed by Christ. We began in dust, In Genesis, But the son of God, Assumed that dust, When he took our flesh. He was crucified, Buried, And raised.

So, In the midst, Of life, We are in death. Yes, That's true. But in the midst, Of death, Christ came to our rescue. He did all, That is required, Which we could not do, For us to have peace, With God.

St. James, Then invites us, In light of this fact, Humble yourselves, Before the Lord. Humble yourselves, Before the Lord, And he will exalt you.

[11:55] Notice the order there. We descend in repentance, And humility, He raises us in grace. We confess our misery, He gives us his mercy.

We acknowledge, That we cannot strengthen, Our strength, Strengthen ourselves, He stands us upright, In his son. And so, In a few moments, You will come forward, You will kneel, Or stand, You will bow your head, You will receive ashes, Brothers and sisters in Christ, Let that act, Preach the gospel to you.

Let that act, Preach the gospel to you. And may I even add this, Let that act, Be the gospel, That you leave here this morning, Continuing to preach. Not that, I have ashes in my forehead, And I'm better than you, And I'm more Christian, I'm more pious, I'm more holy.

No, Let the gospel be this, I am but dust, Destined for death, For Christ, Has come, To my rescue, And delivered me, And saved me, And rescued me, And redeemed me, This is what you are, Apart from grace, Apart from grace, Dust, Curved inward, Unable to save yourself, But the cross, Traced upon you, Declares something greater, It declares that your righteousness, Is not your own, Your hope, Is not your discipline, Your secured future, Which has been guaranteed, And accomplished by Christ, Is not based, On your good effort, Your hope, Is Christ alone, Return to him, Not to improve yourself, But to cling, To his mercy, Return, Not because you are strong, But because he, Is gracious, And merciful, Slow to anger, And abounding,

In steadfast love, Return, Because the one, Who formed you, From dust, Has taken dust, Upon himself, And conquered death, For you, Return, In the name of the Father, And of the Son, And of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

[14:09] Amen.