

Ash Wednesday
Sermon Text: 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10
Related Text: Psalm 51:1-17
Date Preached: February 25, 2009

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” It is quite sobering, to come forward and hear these words as ashes are placed on our foreheads. Those bold enough to come to worship on this day are confronted in an explicit way the reality of our mortality. One day, we will die.

Ever since I was ordained, I have had the sobering duty of saying these words. I find it especially so when children come forward and I say to them, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

In some Christian traditions and from a secular perspective this may seem harsh. We desire to spare children of this reality that we all face. Let them wait until their older to hear the brutal truth of our mortality.

Certainly they don't understand about death, so when a family member dies there is usually either a spoken or unspoken struggle about whether to bring the children to the funeral.

We often will find judgment with people who will say things that are intended to comfort but in reality create even more emotional hurt, such as “It was God’s will.” Frequently men are held to the perception that they should not cry. Be the strong one. And then, shortly after the funeral there are some who expect us to have “moved on”.

Such things can deny the depth of our hurt, deny the vastness of our sorrow and deny the struggle to live in a new reality without our family member with us in the flesh. But isn’t that exactly what we have done when we try to shelter our children from death’s reality. We are afraid of upsetting them. We are afraid they will ask questions that we can’t answer.

Or perhaps we are trying to shelter a part of ourselves from death’s sting. Looking at the face of children and seeing their childlike behavior can be a comfort for us. We see their joy and zest for life and we want to preserve that for them and for ourselves.

Yet as we are reminded, no one is immune to death. Death is the just sentence for our sin. Sin is our disobedience to God. As stated in Romans 6, “the wages of sin is death.”

And so we have gathered here this night, however uncomfortable it may be to hear the words that we will die and one day return to dust. We will feel the ash on our forehead. We will see the ash on the faces of those we love. We don't escape. So where does this leave us? It leaves us helpless, but not hopeless.

It leave us dependent not on ourselves, not on our children and not on any of the countless ways we can try to hide from the reality that we will one day die. For in these there is no hope.

Where our hope resides is in the one who took dust, formed that dust into a human being and with indescribable power, breathed into that human being the breathe of life. With wonder and beauty God gave life to humanity.

When our relationship with God was ruined by our disobedience, God simply didn't give up. God's choice is to show mercy. God's desire is to save that which he created.

So while we may see an instrument of death such as the cross or the ash that reminds us of our mortality, God has transformed these images into ones of hope. The shape of the cross reminds us of the value God has placed upon us. God's desire to save us is so

deep, so vast, that he would enter the world in the person of his son and experience the pain and helplessness of death's sting. His Son is lifted up. Jesus on the cross is a shell of the person who restored sight to the blind, made the lame to walk, and told the dead like Lazarus to come out from the tomb.

Jesus takes the just punishment for our sin upon himself. As we heard in Second Corinthians, "for our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Jesus we might become the righteousness of God." God sacrifices his son out of love. And it is that love that makes us of great value, more than we can imagine.

The ashen shaped cross on our heads speaks the reality of our death, yet its emptiness reminds us that death is not the final word. God's mercy extends to his son, raising him from the unjustness of his death.

The cross on our foreheads reminds us of the claim God has made upon us. Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. We bear this symbol of hope and life. For it is through death that we pass into the promise of life everlasting with Christ, the first to be raised from death.

The message of this day is clear. We are dust. We shall return to dust. And through the grace and mercy of God, we have the hope of new life.

In this life we return to our Lord who is gracious and merciful. He creates in us new and clean hearts. He restores to us the joy of salvation and throughout every day of our life, from the first breath to the final one, sustains us a generous spirit. AMEN.