

Ash Wednesday 2021

“Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

A couple weeks ago there was a tragic and fatal car accident in front of the church, just outside my office window.

I watched the car sail through the air, hit and then roll several times across the dirt parking lot next door. It stirred up a huge cloud of dust that was caught in the wind.

I thought of when we impose ashes on Ash Wednesday and say: “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

That phrase draws from three Old Testament texts, *Genesis 2:7*, *Psalm 104:26* and *Job 34:15*: “then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being... when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. ... all mortals return to dust.”

The point is, God’s good gift of life is fragile and uncertain. We live, then someday our mortal lives end, which actually makes life all the more precious.

Indeed all life is priceless, which is call to prioritize and to focus on what really matters most... so that life is not wasted, but lived well, a life that is useful, meaningful and satisfying, or as we read in *Psalm 90:12*: So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

So, what will each of us do with our one and only precious mortal life?

It begins by recognizing what is of ultimate value and importance, in contrast to frivolous things, unworthy thoughts and activities that devalue, distract and diminish our fruitful living, or that which is contrary or betrays who we truly are or can become, a uniquely special, loved, specifically created and blessed child of God.

It means we strive to live a life that is real and authentic. A life that’s not dependent on how others see us or perceive us, or what they think, assume, say or believe about us... which is what Jesus is getting at in the *Matthew 6* text we read about authenticity before God.

Our outward religious practices, we don’t do them to be seen by others... for though they might be impressed, apparently the Lord our God is not.

Jesus is speaking against an exaggerated sense of self-importance, our need to be seen, recognized and admired, and the various ways we seek approval and validation from others, or measure ourselves and our self-worth in competition or comparison to other people.

During Ash Wednesday as we begin Lent, we are reminded that life is finite and we are dust, but also that through Jesus, resurrection is in our future. By the grace of God, we know that when our mortal lives end, Jesus has prepared an eternal home for us to be with him.

Yes, we will return to dust, but God is not yet finished with us, for we go on to live eternally in in God's Kingdom with Christ... and in fact the mark of dust we normally receive is meant as a visible reminder of God's steadfast love and claim on our lives. It is a sign of God's promise to give us eternal life... as Jesus promised in John 10:10: I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly.

But we lose our way at times and have not been entirely faithful to God. We get selfish, fearful and anxious. We get frustrated and say things that are unkind and hurtful.

We can get so wrapped up in ourselves that we ignore others in need, and in an effort to be first we nudge others out of our way.

For all of us, there are parts of our lives we'd prefer to keep hidden and secret ... including our scars, our failures and wounds, our shame that hasn't quite healed.

During the season of Lent as we journey toward Easter. It is a good time to acknowledge our failures, our brokenness and our needs, and recognize that we can't fix ourselves or repair all the damage on our own.

Lent is not about self-improvement, but it's listening for the Spirit's Light to shine, expose and heal into our deepest darkness and despair.

The Good News is that our God is steadfast and loving. When we recognize and acknowledge our need, we receive God's healing grace through Jesus Christ. And God's love is far greater and more powerful than even our worst sin and failure.

On Ash Wednesday, we are reminded that we are mortals who fail, and that we are helpless, for we cannot fix where we are broken and wounded.

But and by grace we can leave here in peace, knowing that God's love doesn't leave us struggling in the dust, but claims us in love that brings healing and hope as the Holy Spirit guides us toward new life in Christ...

... a reminder that God will not ever abandon, but will always listen and welcome us back... to forgive all our sins and failings for we are indeed the beloved and precious children of God.

The season of Lent is a time for us to slow down and reflect on how we are living, to think about our direction, and if we are really traveling to where we want to go? When we finally arrive, will it be where we truly want to be?

We could just pass on by and inattentively rush through this life, but there is so much more for those who pause to notice, reflect and appreciate.

This is a perfect time to think about our faith, to pray and read our Bibles, to consider how we are living our lives as the children of God.

Though our lives are short and these mortal lives will end, Jesus promised to prepare a place for us to live forever in the Kingdom of God... so we don't have to be afraid or concerned.

Lent is a gift, our season toward a deeper and truer life and walk with God... the life Jesus wants for each of us.

My suggestion is to sit in prayer and with Scripture every day. Open your mind and heart so that the Spirit can teach you what it means to be a faithful and authentic disciple of Jesus Christ.

Let our Lenten journey challenge who we've been, and who we've become, and move us closer in our walk of faith toward all that the Lord created, equipped and would enable us to become... so that at the end, we will have lived our mortal lives well.

This say and throughout the season of Lent, "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return,"

but nevertheless, trust in God's grace and go in peace.