

**Ash Wednesday: February 26, 2020**  
**“The Dust and Ashes of a Fallen Creation”**

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This Lenten Season we are going to reflect on the connection of the Days of Creation and the Days of Holy Week. As we begin this season, we hear the reminder of the curse at the fall into sin, *“To Adam [God] said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.’”*<sup>1</sup>

Lent begins with a stark reminder, “remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” That’s why I don’t dust; it could be a relative. Seriously though, the days of God’s perfect creation were soon marred by the disobedience of the pinnacle of His creation. All was in perfect harmony, and man was placed in a position of stewardship to care for, to maintain, and to enjoy the fruits of God’s creation. It was simple – live as a child, trust in God, enjoy where you are, just leave the tree of knowledge of good and evil alone. All of creation was made for mankind to enjoy, and to show the obedience of their love towards God, only one thing was required – leave that one thing alone.

They did not, and the effects threw the perfect harmony of God’s creation into disarray. No longer would man live forever; now death must be given as payment for sin. No longer would man and creature live peacefully; now fear would characterize their relationship. No longer would man simply enjoy the fruits of creation; now thorns and thistles will hinder the good plants, and sweat and hard-work will be required for man’s sustenance and continued existence. No longer will husband and wife live in perfect accord; now desires will turn away from each other and they will war for who really is in charge of a relationship—who gets to gets to wear the pants. No longer will mankind be innocent and pure; now your

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3:17–19

flesh will war within you, and be subject to sin, decay, and death—that is, dust is not simply a living creature, but is dry dusty death and will struggle until the dust finally settles.

This is what the Church Year is designed to do; and especially Lent. We focus on Jesus' coming, birth, revelation as God, His suffering, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, seating at the right hand of God to judge the living and the death, and His teachings. From Advent One to the Last Sunday of the Church Year, we gather to hear the Word and Work of Jesus; how He taught the Word of God in its truth and purity and lived a holy life according to it!

Lent can have a bad habit of being turned around to focus on myself. What I give up for Lent. My fast and my bodily preparation. It can be a good and useful practice, but that person is truly worthy and well-prepared who has faith in these words, “given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” If you choose to fast, or give-up something, during this time, great; I encourage you to do it to the glory of God and replace those things with God's Word. Do it with a focus on Christ, not on yourself. Do it with the knowledge that Christ has paid for your sins, and His death restores your dead dust to life. While Lent begins with dust, it does not return simply to dust. Christ has taken on dust, became a Son of Man, a living creature, to restore the dust to life forevermore.

Lent does bring stark reminders of sin and death. The Alleluia's are put away for a time. Instead of joyful songs of “Praise the Lord,” our eyes are cast down to the suffering and death of the cross. We are reminded of the reason for that action of God, and many abandon this season because, “Pastor, it is too much doom and gloom. We just like Easter, and so we will for sure come then. We like the angelic singing. We like the glimpse of heaven. Lent seems to leave us in dust and ashes, sitting in sackcloth with tears.”

If it were up to us, left up to our fallen humanity, which of us would choose to focus on the suffering and death of the Son of God? To walk through Lent is important, because it forces us to sit in the ashes of fallen creation. It forces us to stop and think about something we really don't want to—sin and death. This season recalls for us to ponder just what it is if we get what we want—that is for God to leave us alone, for us to earn our own way, for us to punch our own ticket

to heaven, for us to be left to do it by myself. It causes us to behold the truth of our works, our words, our lives of dust.

So, it is good Lord to be here. We need a time in our busy lives of plenty to stop, refocus, rethink, repent, and return. We need this extended time with our Lord in the wilderness as it were—that we might learn from Him that dust needs restoration. Man really does not live by bread alone, by the sweat of your own brow, by your own works and toil, but on every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God.<sup>2</sup> The works of creation are upheld by the Power of His Word. The work of redemption is completed, finished, by the Work of His Word. The calling, gathering, enlightening, sanctifying, and keeping are all done by the Holy Spirit who works within the Holy Christian Church on earth by keeping and being in the Word.

The restoration of God's people is not a mere outward existence. It wasn't just to extend dust's life for a few hours; it was to restore the dust in perfection; to be in the sight of God and to be declared by Him, "It is good."

What does this look like? It is not just a rendering of the garments. It is not just giving up something; it is giving up everything. Psalm 51 declares, "***O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.***"<sup>3</sup>

It wasn't just about eating or not eating the fruit of the tree—it was about complete purity, innocence and trust in God. Jesus didn't just give a sacrifice, He was the sacrifice. His entire life, word and work, was in fear, love, and trust in God above all things. Jesus' death wasn't just an outward sacrifice, it was a broken spirit and contrite heart. The same word used to describe the creation of man as a living creature, is the same word Jesus speaks when He says, "***I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.***"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 4:4

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 51:15–17

<sup>4</sup> John 10:11

For the sake of fallen creation, for the sake of sin-filled and sin-cursed dust, Jesus walked creation to restore it. During Lent, we set our focus on Jesus, ***“Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”***<sup>5</sup>

This day, this season, teaches us to number our days. It forces dust to recognize our sin and weaknesses, to see the end of this fleeting life, to see our life is a gift from God, and He alone creates and preserves it. That which was created very good, was broken by sin, AND God Himself has taken upon that very brokenness to restore it to be very good again, ***“God made Him Who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”***<sup>6</sup>

Christ is our only hope—He always has been, and He always will be. Jesus has reconciled all things to Himself by His Incarnation and His Cross, ***“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”***<sup>7</sup>

You are given this peace, as you are washed in the blood of Lamb poured over you in your baptism. It is there the new life in Christ begins, and dust is restored to live new words as spoken by Peter this evening, ***“May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the***

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<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 12:2-3

<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21

<sup>7</sup> Colossians 1:15-20

*world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.”<sup>8</sup>*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you are cleansed and restored. While you still have and live in the dust and ashes of the fallen creation, Christ’s work of creation and re-creation are at work in you, for you. You are an eternal heir of everlasting life, and for you are served the fruits of His cross. Lifeblood is poured out for dust, and now yours is life forevermore.

“Though great our sins, yet greater still  
 Is God’s abundant favor;  
 His hand of mercy never will  
 Abandon us, nor waver.  
 Our shepherd good and true is He,  
 Who will at last His Israel free  
 From all their sin and sorrow.”<sup>9</sup> Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> 2 Peter 1:2-9

<sup>9</sup> From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee LSB 607:5