

ASHES TO ASHES, DUST TO DUST

Ash Wednesday Meditation

March 6, 2019

Text: II Corinthians 5:20-6:10; 7:1

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust" ... I must confess my earliest memory of hearing that phrase was in my junior and senior high days on the football team. In one of the more common cheers, the cheerleaders would ring out in repeated rhythm, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust; you can beat anybody but you can't beat us!" I also remember our parody of that chant: "Florida oranges, Texas cactus; we play (name of opponent) just for practice!" The phrase had no religious association for me at the time; up until that age I had never attended an Ash Wednesday service and had only been to one funeral. The phrase was also used as a song title by David Bowie in 1980; one of his weirder songs (which is saying something, because I found just about all David Bowie songs to be odd) included these lyrics: "Ashes to ashes, funk to funky, We know Major Tom's a junkie"

Actually, the exact phrase is *"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust"* is poetic, and not in the Bible as such, but it is nevertheless a biblical concept through and through. The phrase actually comes from the funeral service in the 1662 Anglican Book of Common Prayer, *"Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of His great mercy to take unto Himself the soul of our dear brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ; Who shall change our vile body, that it may be like unto His glorious body, according to the mighty working, whereby He is able to subdue all things to Himself."* I use an Episcopalian variation of that at the graveside, which incorporates wording from Ecclesiastes 12:7 and Revelation 14:13 – *"Forasmuch as it has pleased almighty God in His wise providence to take out of this world the soul of our deceased Christian brother/sister, we therefore commit his/her body to the ground ... earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The spirit has returned to God who gave it. It is in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that we commend to God almighty the soul of (name of deceased). Blessed are those who die in the Lord, says the Spirit of God. They rest from their labors, and their works follow them."*

The phrasing is based in part on Genesis 2:17, where we are told: *"And the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."* Also from Genesis 3:19, when God speaks to the first couple after the Fall: *"By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food, until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken, for dust you are and to dust you will return."* Also from Ecclesiastes 3:20 -- *"All come from the same place, all come from dust, and to dust all return."* It is then Abraham, and later Job, who also incorporate the word "ashes" as somewhat synonymous with "dust." Abraham is engaged in a bargaining with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, and as if to make clear to God that he knows his place, he states in Genesis 18:27, *"Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes."* Later, in Job 30:19, Job speaks in his affliction and says, *"I am reduced to dust and ashes."*

At the close of worship tonight I'll be imposing ashes and saying the words from Genesis 3:19 spoken in many churches worldwide today, *"From dust you came and to dust you shall return."* As inferred by Abraham and Job, Ashes are somewhat synonymous with dust; as some of you may remember there is a bit of a play on words in the Hebrew phonetics. Roughly transliterated, Dust is pronounced *Ah-far*, and Ashes is *Eh-far*. (*"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust" is much more poetic in the original Hebrew.*) Again, that phrase *"From dust you came and to dust you shall return,"* goes back to that third chapter of Genesis, just after the Fall. God reminds Adam and Eve that one somber consequence of their disobedience is that one day they will die and their bodies return to the dust. The serpent had promised them they would not die, but the serpent was a lying snake. And now, death is part of life. As expressed in Ecclesiastes 12:7, when our bodies die, our spirit returns to God who gave it.

As the end of the service tonight, I will offer the imposition of ashes. Another bit of interesting trivia some of you already know is that the ashes are traditionally composed of burned palm fronds from the previous Palm Sunday. Those who desire ashes may have them imposed on the traditional central location of the forehead, or you may elect the more discreet option of imposition we've given to have the ashes placed on your hand of action, as a discretely hidden reminder to you that Lenten disciplines are proactive; they are as much about DOING as they are about sacrifice in grateful acknowledgement of what our Lord did and sacrificed for us. If you do choose to come forward, just indicate to me your preference by either holding out your hand or by standing with arms at your side.

Another interesting tidbit of information is that in Hebrew the word "Adam" (pronounced ah-DAHM) is also the masculine form of "adamah" which means "ground," "earth," or "clay." Adam's very name carries with it the source of his physical origin. The same levels of meaning exist in English; the word "humanity" comes from the Latin root "humus" which means "earth" or "dirt." From the same Latin root come the words "humility" and "humor." So, being human and having a sense of humor and being humble are all etymologically linked with the idea of being "down to earth."¹

Last year at this time I mentioned the lyrics of a top ten song sung by the rock group Kansas in 1977 ... I'm a bit nonplussed realizing that was FORTY TWO YEARS ago (yikes), but I digress: *"I close my eyes / Only for a moment, and the moment's gone / All my dreams / Pass before my eyes a curiosity / Dust in the wind / All they are is dust in the wind. Same old song, just a drop of water in an endless sea. All we do crumbles to the ground though we refuse to see. Dust in the wind All we are is dust in the wind. Now, don't hang on, nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky; It slips away. And all your money won't another minute buy. Dust in the wind. All we are is dust in the wind; Everything is dust in the wind."*

Now, in a way that almost sounds a bit reminiscent of Ash Wednesday's liturgical refrain, *"From dust you came, to dust you shall return."* But, it really isn't. Are we literally nothing more than dirty dust shaped by random physical and evolutionary forces? Is the message of Ash Wednesday really that *"... all we are is dust in the wind"*? Well, the Ash Wednesday liturgy certainly intends to confront us with the reality of our mortality. But that reality is not what Ash Wednesday is fully all about! Ash Wednesday (and the season of Lent, for that matter) is about a new reality, as echoed in the lectionary text for this evening: *"From now on," Paul declares, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: the old has gone, the new has come. Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"*

The new reality we celebrate and contemplate this season of Lent is this: Yes, Kansas, we are dust, but it is not true that is *all* we are! We are eternal beings inhabiting physical bodies, and as we are reconciled to the eternal God through the grace and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, we become the recipients of God's grace, mercy, and steadfast love. We are dust, yes, but now we have an eternal destiny, a high purpose and a holy calling ... to be co-workers with God while we are in these physical bodies, going about the work of reconciliation and redemption and restoration (*rather than divisiveness and disintegration and dissipation, which so much of the rest of the world seems to be about*). We are given grace and a purpose and a promise of eternity. The repentance of Lent is not a passive mindset; it is not just about being sorry and sad. Repentance is active, repentance is changing direction, repentance is embracing a new life and a high purpose which has been given to us. The Lenten call is to lead us forward from penitence and sadness; to work toward what **should** be, what **can** be, what **oughta** be, what God intends for it to be for all creation. Yes, our bodies are still dust, but we are inhabited by a redeemed, eternal and living spirit that makes us *stubborn* dust with a high purpose and a holy calling to be about the proactive work of reconciliation and redemption while we are able, which will one day reap eternal benefits.

This lectionary passage for Ash Wednesday speaks about this stubbornly proactive Lenten mindset: *"As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything."* Yes, even though we have experienced the power and redemption of God, we still encounter afflictions, hardships, calamities, sleepless nights, and all the rest ... and our mortal bodies will one day return to the dust of which we are made. Ash Wednesday is a reminder that our reality is both harsh AND blessed. Like Paul, we are *"... dying, and yet, we are alive ... punished, and yet not killed... sorrowful, yet always rejoicing... having nothing, and yet possessing everything."*

"From dust you came; to dust you will return." This Ash Wednesday, remember your mortality, anticipate your eternity and go out to live accordingly. *"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, you can beat anybody but you can't beat us"* ... because of what was done for us this holy season, we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us and gave His life for our eternal redemption.²

¹ A online friend drew my attention to an interesting article to my attention after the worship service which may tie in to our "earthy" origins; see <https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/garden-how-to/soil-fertilizers/antidepressant-microbes-soil.htm?fbclid=IwAR1f8sd7S7A13TP5KcAIQx4GqDroWOfHscJSz6GZCqV0TKcPOY12LSd1mg>

² See Romans 8:31-39