

EVERYTHING Will Kill You ... So CHOOSE SOMETHING Good!

Ash Wednesday Meditation

February 17, 2021

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.

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."* 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, *"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."* Also from Ecclesiastes 3:20 -- *"All come from dust, and to dust all return."* And from the seventies rock band, Kansas: *"All we are is dust in the wind."* (Just kidding! Ash Wednesday always reminds me of that oldie).

During the liturgical imposition of ashes the words from Genesis 3:19 are spoken, *"From dust you came and to dust you shall return."* As inferred by Abraham and Job, ashes are somewhat synonymous with dust; as 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 sin 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.

Ash Wednesday's liturgical refrain confronts 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. The new reality we celebrate and contemplate this season of Lent is this: We ARE dust, but it is not true that is *all* we are, Kansas! We are eternal beings inhabiting physical bodies comprised of dust, and as we are reconciled to the eternal God through the grace and work of our Lord Jesus Christ that we especially commemorate this liturgical season of Lent, 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, a holy calling ... to be co-workers with God while we are in these dusty physical bodies, going about the constructive work of reconciliation and redemption and restoration, rather than engaging in dusty 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 about changing direction; repentance is about embracing a new life and a high purpose which has been graciously 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 **ought to** be, what God intends for it to be for all creation. Yes, our bodies are still dust, but our bodies are inhabited by a redeemed, eternal and living spirit with a high purpose and a holy calling to be about the proactive work of reconciliation and redemption while we are able in the time we have, which will one day reap eternal benefits. In short, we care called to use our time **well**.

The sermon title was inspired by a poster I purchased a month or so ago which I'm about to have framed and placed in my office: it's a picture of a middle aged guy out running in the high mountains with this caption above: *"Everything will kill you ... and this caption below ... so choose something fun."* Well, I amended that a bit for the sermon title. Choose something **good!** Don't live your lives cowering in fear of "something" that might kill you. Get out there and make your life worthwhile! Yes, everything will kill us ... we're dust, we all die, something will "get us" eventually ... so let us use our time well, reaping eternal benefits. You may remember this little ditty I shared in a sermon last November:



There was a very cautious man who never laughed or played ...
He never risked, he never tried, he never sang or prayed.
And when one day he passed away, his insurance was denied
For since he never really lived ... they claimed he never died.

One cannot really live without taking risks. I think it's something we need to be reminded of today.¹

I've quoted this before a few times in the past, but it bears repeating, from that great theologian ... Ann Landers. She wrote in a column subtitled, "YOU CAN BANK ON IT." *"Imagine you had a bank that each morning credited your account with \$1,440 -- with one condition: whatever portion of the \$1,440 you failed to use during the day would be erased from your account, and no balance would be carried over. What would you do? You'd draw out every cent every day and use it to your best advantage! Well, you do have such a bank, and its name is TIME. Every morning, this bank credits you with 1,440 minutes. And it writes off as forever lost whatever portion you have failed to invest."* God grants us each day 1,440 minutes each day from His bank of time, giving us opportunity to put our faith to work, making GOOD investments with that time to reap eternal benefits. It doesn't sound very religious, but I like the way one person put it: *"HAVE A BLAST WHILE YOU LAST!"* Make the most of the time you have while you have it! Earn the payout of your life insurance policy!

Paul was certainly one who used time well, who faced risks to choose to do good at every opportunity. He speaks about this stubbornly proactive Lenten mindset in our reading this evening: *"As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance; in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots; labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in genuine love ... we are treated as imposters, and yet are true; as unknown and yet well known, as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."* Yes, 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."*

This Ash Wednesday, we remember our mortality, anticipate our eternity and go out to live accordingly. Because remember: Everything will kill you, so choose something good ... for the greater glory of God in gratitude for the grace you've received through Jesus Christ our Lord.

¹ I edited this out more or less on the spot, but opted to include it here: Parish Priest Father Wilson at Immaculate Conception in Cranston commented in his parish newsletter that "one of the more astonishing experiences of 2020 is how fear crippled us in a way never seen before. Our ancestors went daily into a world with far greater dangers than Covid 19 and with far fewer medicines. The level of fear today of a virus that is less serious than polio or tuberculosis is astounding. While precautions are appropriate, our fear has coerced us to be separated from the things we need most." And, I would add, to be separated from the things we need most to do.