

Ash Wednesday (c)
Psalm 51
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
March 2, 2022

Ash Wednesday. It's a somber day...and rightly so. I've been doing this going on 29 years now, and it's still a strange feeling, putting ashes on the foreheads of people I love, and giving them this...reminder of death. I remember how especially hard it was, when my kids were little...it was almost disturbing...to touch their heads with these ashes. It really hits me...being reminded that someday, these eyes that I'm looking into...someday that light will be extinguished, there will be a goodbye. We will all be gone. It's hard to say "you are dust" to people in your congregation whom you love.

But today believers throughout the world purposely take time out to acknowledge death. Is it because we're morbid, death-obsessed people? No. You and I can face death squarely, because we know Jesus is with us in death. And if Jesus is with us in death, we are—and we will be—with him in his victory. Easter—the resurrection of Christ—makes what we're doing here today possible. Praise God. I can fully admit I'm a dead man, because I know that Jesus lives for me. In the gospel lesson, Jesus lovingly prods us to examine ourselves. It's not that any amount of self-examination is going to save us. It's that Jesus has saved us, so now we can really look at our own lives, wrestle with ourselves, engage in spiritual warfare, fight against that old Adam in us, that old Eve. And we do it knowing that—as long as we're in this world—we're ever going to be **done** with that spiritual struggle. We do it not so we can be done, but so that we can be better disciples for Jesus here on earth. We do it so we can be more more joyful, bolder witnesses for our Savior, and for the sake of the people around us. Jesus has saved me, so now I admit that I am dust, I can see my own garbage. Whatever it is today. And I can give it to God. When I can see myself as a dead man, I can also see better what I'm clinging to today, that's not God.

All of our readings tonight remind us that we are completely dependent upon God, who gives us life. With God, *dependence* becomes a good word! Today we hear Psalm 51 (we're looking at the Psalms of Lament this year). The words are attributed to David after Nathan the prophet tells him how badly he's messed up with the whole Bathsheba affair. David had become puffed up with himself. At the beginning of that episode with Bathsheba, he's lounging on his couch. Now he has all this power as king. He sees something he wants...in this case, a human being..and what does he do? He takes what he wants. David has become a taker. Everything now exists for him. Well, we know how the story turns out. David has put himself in the place of God, the giver of life. And when human beings try to take that position, we end up taking life from other people; which is exactly what David does. To cover his own mistakes and maintain that puffed up position, he ultimately has someone killed. It's an ugly tragic story, and Nathan calls him out on his despicable actions. The words of the Psalm show us David completely throwing himself on God's mercy; he says "Against you, you alone, God, have I sinned." He's not trying to shore up his situation any more. David knows that he has gone directly against God. And he knows only God can bring a new life out of that wreck he's gotten

himself and everyone around him into. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." Notice, David isn't saying "please God, help me make some improvements." He's saying he's a dead man. He's not asking for improvements, he knows he needs a new life, a completely new Spirit, and only God can give it to him. It's a picture of total dependance. And remember, David wasn't done yet, just because he threw himself on God's mercy. He still had to face all the consequences of his actions in this world. But thank God, he knew who was going to give him life every step of the way until he was finally ashes and dust.

I love how Paul, in the second reading, talks about believers as people who act like they already possess everything they need. It's true to life. I've known so many believers who have very little, materially, but who are constantly giving. Likewise, I know wealthy disciples of Jesus who *also know* they really have nothing of their own. And they spend their wealth in beautiful ways...ways which enrich other people. You look at these believers giving—and you've got to think: these people must have another source of wealth altogether. They must not be depending on themselves and their own worldly record. If they were, they'd be a lot more worried about themselves and a lot less generous. Of course, we know where all the wealth comes from. Jesus just speaks the truth: Whatever we think *we* can keep in this life...you can bet, moths and rust will consume it. But if you live by that wealth that can not be counted—by a treasure God continually pours out on you—that life that he's given you from his own cross—well, death will never be able to keep up with God's generosity.

Yes, there is a sadness about Ash Wednesday, because we do think about all the crud in our lives which keeps us from being who we should be. We think about the evil in this world which destroys human beings and God's creation. We see innocent people being run over in Ukraine. We think about the separations and deaths we've experienced and will face in this life. Today is a day when we face the brokenness. And on a personal level, we throw away our illusions of self-subsistence, and face the reality: life is fragile, we cannot stand alone, we are not innocent, we hold on to things which die.

Without God, the brokenness we're admitting today could lead to fear and despair. It's natural to look away from the darkness. It's natural to cover up the ashes with a rosy picture, as in: well, I'm just going to try and find a way around it. I'm going to live for my work, I'm going to live for my kids or my spouse or my social standing or my money. I'm going to find ultimate meaning for my life in politics, or whatever. It's natural to grasp hold of things which die in order to cover up the reality that we're dust and ashes, and that if we're going to live, we don't just need some improvements. We're going to need a whole new life. But as believers, like David, we know we have a Lord who brings a new life and a new world out of the shattered, broken parts of our lives.

We embrace the truth about ourselves today, because we know the truth about God. Where many might look at death and see only a vast power that takes everything away from them, you and I see our Lord Jesus going into death and winning the ultimate victory. We see a Lord who meets us in the ashes and says "here, take my life...this is my body, this is my blood. It's all yours." It's when we hear that great news that we

understand St. Paul, when he says, "people might look at us as being sorrowful under these dirty ashes, but we're actually rejoicing today. They might look at all this as being a little strange; in their eyes we're devoting a day to ashes and a sign of death; but in fact we know that under this sign, we're going to live forever. They might look at us as ridiculously unconcerned with wealth and status, but the fact is, we're going to make many people rich with a treasure that no power in this world can exhaust. We might not look to the world like we have all that much treasure, according to normal standards, but we're confident: Everything God has...he's pouring it out for us.