

To Dust You Shall Return

Ash Wednesday – 2/17/21 – Mt. Calvary Luth.
Text: Genesis 3:6-24 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 19b [The LORD said to Adam,] “...for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Introduction

- ✘ Next to Good Friday, today is probably the most somber day on the Christian calendar. This is the day when we remember, as I asked you to remember at the beginning of our service when I placed ashes on your forehead, that yes, we are all dust and to dust we shall return.
 - ➔ Those words and that action of placing ashes on the forehead are a uniquely personal way of making a very important connection for each of us. It takes us back approximately 6 or 7 thousand years to the time of Creation; to our very first ancestors, Adam and Eve.
 - ➔ And we remember the first great tragedy in human history; the day that necessitated everything that we will talk about throughout this season of Lent which we begin today.
 - ➔ It was the day that all of mankind fell from the charmed life of perfection in paradise and entered into the cursed life of sin and disobedience. The LORD Himself pronounced the judgement upon Adam; a judgement that extended to Eve and to every one of their descendants, save one. Verse 19, “For you are dust, and to dust you shall return”.

I. Adam and Eve return to dust.

- ✘ Those words are a direct statement from God to Adam immediately after Adam refused to stand up against the deception of the devil and his wife. Yes, he failed that day to fulfill his role as the first proclaimer of the Word of God which the LORD had appointed to him.
 - ➔ You see, prior to Eve’s existence, the LORD told Adam in Genesis 2:16-17, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”. So it was Adam’s job, when God gave him the woman as the other half of mankind for a companion and helper, to properly convey both God’s command and His judgement against disobedience to her.
- ✘ So what happened? Did he do so, and Eve just didn’t listen to him? Or did he do a poor job of proclaiming the Word? Those are both questions that really don’t matter, because they are only a sinful attempt to do just what Adam and Eve both did when God confronted each one of them with their sin. They vainly attempted to try and pass the blame onto someone else.
- ✘ What’s important is what the LORD is communicating to Adam and Eve when He says, “You are dust and to dust you shall return”. You see, this is God brushing aside all of the feeble excuses that He knew we humans would devise over the centuries, and instead taking Adam and Eve and you and me right back to the original command where we also see the promised consequences of disobedience.
 - ➔ God was not vague. He was crystal clear - if you eat the fruit from that tree you will then be required to die.
- ✘ And why dust? Well, remember that God formed Adam from the dust of the ground. So even in God’s judgement He acknowledges His personal act of lovingly creating Adam from the dust of the ground: “...for out of it you were taken; for you are dust” (v. 19).
 - ➔ But with the next words, “to dust you shall return” the LORD tells Adam of his and Eve’s eventual physical death, and the decay and the return of their bodies back to the state of their

origin: the very thing that would happen to every human body from that time forward, right up to our day as well.

- ✘ Yet there is more. There is also an eternal spiritual death that Adam and Eve's sin brought into the world that day; an eternal separation that sin places between mankind and God.
 - ➔ God is perfect and holy. He cannot be in the presence of sin, or His perfect state would be corrupted by it. So it was necessary that mankind be banished from Him; from His love, His mercy, and His compassion until God's plan could be fulfilled.
 - ➔ Now, Adam would live the rest of his days recounting those sobering words from God. Oh, how he must have wished that he could turn the hands of time back and undo what he and Eve had done; but it was done. "You are dust, and to dust you shall return."

II. We return to dust.

- ✘ You and I, folks; we too are conceived and born facing the same problem that Adam did following his sin. As Paul writes about it in Romans 5:12, "Therefore, ...sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned".
 - ➔ That is why, you and I must still hear God's statement spoken to us tonight, so many years later; because the truth still applies to us all, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return".
- ✘ There's only one problem though. You and I don't like to think about that happening, do we? Our own death, that is; the fact that one day we too will go into the earth. Who wants to remember that? It makes us uncomfortable. "Why be so negative pastor?"
 - ➔ And our society – they work hard at trying to get us to avoid remembering that we are dust. From advertising to books to movies; so often the impression we try to promote and think about is that life in this world will not actually end; that we are invincible; that somehow I am the one exception to death!
 - ➔ So, don't talk about preparing a will. It's bad luck to do any advanced funeral planning or the like. No, if we just don't think about it, then somehow we lie to ourselves and think that we can avoid it. This is the way that so many people go through life. Not only is it unhealthy, it actually denies the truth of our sinful reality by ignoring God's own word – sometimes right up until we find ourselves on death's doorstep.
- ✘ So Ash Wednesday is the correction that we all need. It helps us faithfully face the truth that God wants us to remember, not just today, but every day in repentance and faith, "To dust you shall return".
 - ➔ That's why we gather here and begin our time of worship as we do; confessing our sins in humble repentance. For it is crucial that we admit before God and one another the depth and the deserved consequence of our original depravity and nature.
 - ➔ Yes, we must not allow ourselves to try and pass the blame anywhere except upon ourselves. And so we express our sorrow and regret for all of our sin; both those things we should have done that we did not, and those we have not done that we were supposed to do.
 - ➔ And we humbly ask God to forgive our sin. We ask Him to help us amend our way of life, and by His power and grace, to live a life that is more in line with what He desires of us.

III. God remembers us.

- ⊗ But even more important than you remembering that you are dust is the fact that God remembered that you are dust. In Psalm 103:14, the psalmist instructs us that God “knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust”.
 - ➔ And Scripture shows us that whenever God remembers His people, He always takes action on behalf of His people, to bless us.
- ⊗ In fact, even before God told Adam, “You are dust and to dust you shall return”, He had already remembered you and me and all of His people. Just four verses earlier, with Adam and Eve’s listening on, God pronounced His judgement against Satan, promising that He was going to send a specific man; one of Eve descendants to do battle with sin and Satan. And in that battle, Satan would do harm to the man, but in the end the fatal blow would come upon Satan’s head. His power would come to an end, along with the power of sin and death.
 - ➔ This is what we are remembering with the ash dust upon our foreheads in the shape of a cross tonight. God did act on behalf of us and all people. He came here and lived among us in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the One who completely and voluntarily took all sin and all evil upon Himself – even the penalty for sin and evil – death itself.
 - ➔ It was upon His death that Jesus went into the earth, into the dust of the ground, as He was buried in a tomb.

IV. God does not leave us in dust.

- ⊗ But as Paul says in Romans 6:9, “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over Him”. Yes, on the third day, Jesus rose from the dust of the earth, just as He predicted He would do.
 - ➔ And since He died for you and me, so we are assured that we too will rise from the dust of the earth on the day when Jesus returns. On that day Jesus has promised that we will have new, glorified bodies; bodies that are incorruptible, no longer subject to sin; bodies that are immortal, no longer subject to the curse of death, because sin with its punishment has been paid in full at the cross.
- ⊗ Again that’s why those ashes I see upon your heads right now are in the shape of a cross. For it is only in the cross of Christ that you and I and all mankind can have the hope of life eternal.

Conclusion

- ⊗ There’s an old expression that I would bet you’ve all heard before: “Left in the dust”. For example, as an old runner and fan of track and field, whenever one runner would pull away from the other, those watching the race and those remembering it afterward might say, he “left that other runner in the dust”.
 - ➔ You and I give thanks tonight and every day as believers that our gracious God has not “left us in the dust”. He has not abandoned us to the place of death and destruction that we actually deserve.
- ⊗ No, He has not left us behind. In fact it is just the opposite. He came here in the person of Jesus Christ to make absolutely certain that we would be lifted up from the dust of the earth.
 - ➔ Because of Jesus, death no longer has dominion over us. We need not fear it, for it is not our ultimate end. Just as Christ rose physically, bodily, from the grave, so in Jesus we too will join Him as Paul says in Romans 6:5 “in a resurrection like His”.
 - ➔ So tonight, rejoice dear Christian, for God will not leave you in the dust. Amen.