

Genesis 3:19
Ash Wednesday
February 18, 2026

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

For this evening, I'd like to go slightly outside our assigned readings, and go to the heart of this day called Ash Wednesday. The Lord's holy Word spoken to Adam in the shadows of the Fall: "*Dust you are, and unto dust you shall return.*"

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Ash Wednesday seems to have multiple themes to it, and if we're not careful, we will accidentally set those themes *against* each other:

1. The futility of man – "dust you are, and unto dust you shall return."
2. Repentance – "Return to the Lord your God" (Old Testament reading) and again (Epistle Reading), "Be reconciled to God. Today is the day of salvation!"
3. Christian discipline (Gospel Reading) – "When you fast, when you pray, when you give alms."

If those are the evening's three themes, here's how we, in our faulty reason and logic, accidentally set them against each other:

Man reasons:

1. "If I am really **futile**, then what good is it to **repent**? And, if I *can* turn around and return to the Lord, am I really the **futility** of dust?" (Notice how repentance is set against man's futility by a misunderstanding that repentance is somehow a

righteousness of sorts rather than a despairing of one's self with hope in God's mercy in His chosen Messiah.)

2. Again man reasons, "If **repentance** is about the day of salvation and the free forgiveness of God, then why do I need Christian **discipline**? And, if I *do* need Christian **discipline**, then what good is the day of salvation? How incomplete must God's salvation be!" (Notice how salvation is misinterpreted as 'freedom *from* God's holiness,' and how Christian discipline is misinterpreted as punishment to keep us measuring up to salvation!)

Against these misinterpretations, or even seeming contradictions, the Scriptures speak in unity; and we ought see the unity as it plays out on Ash Wednesday, *both* in the proclamation of our futility that leads to repentance *and* as it ushers in a season of Christian discipline in anticipation of the new life that is ours in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now, Ash Wednesday is often seen as "the beginning of the season of Christian discipline." And, in our day, and because of seeing the Gospel reading for tonight with a bit of tunnel vision, many see Matthew 6 as *the* prescription for Christian discipline, the recipe of righteousness that has three basic disciplines: fasting, prayer, almsgiving. Certainly, Jesus speaks as if these three disciplines are a given in Christian life, salutary to practice. But, if such were the totality of Jesus' teaching on Christian discipline, why

do the epistles speak so little of it? And why do they speak so *robustly* on other forms of Christian discipline. In fact, Christ himself speaks of Christian discipline in a manner far more robust than some three-ingredient recipe; and in the Lenten Wednesdays to come we will focus on that... on the combat of sanctification, the battle within each Christian's heart, to slay the Old Man and train the New Man.

But, tonight, it's important to stick with the focus on what Sin has done to this creation. That's *really* the focus of Ash Wednesday, isn't it? If Good Friday is about *Christ's* death and our *salvation*, Ash Wednesday is about *our* death and *condemnation* (or, our *condemnation* and therein our *death*). For that is exactly what the Fall brought. And, if we mingle justification with sanctification, mingle rescue from sin and death with Christian piety and daily life, we will give each other false hope that leads to horrible despair.

Let me give you a real-life example of how easily and unintentionally this mingling can happen: I recently had opportunity to listen to a high school principal welcome incoming freshmen and their parents, and his pep talk to prepare these students for high school studies as those studies prepared them for the real world began this way: "You were not created just to die." Okay, off to a good start... even used the word 'created' to perhaps hint at his Christian faith. Wonderful! But, as our government schools will not allow any mention of God beyond that, and certainly do not understand the reality and magnitude of the Fall, the resulting effort was less than helpful. The pep talk continued: "You were not created

just to die! (Then) You did not enter this broken world just to die.”

Oh, contraire, my friend. That’s exactly what the Fall did (“the broken world”) to the world on a macro level and did to each one of you and your existence... it left you with no potential but death and condemnation. That’s *exactly* how devastating the Fall is, that it renders you merely dust and to dust you shall return.

You see, you can’t put rose-colored glasses on the Fall and on daily life in the Fall without undercutting its seriousness. True, God did not *create* you to die. But, when you can’t mention the Fall, or taught to believe Genesis 1 and 2 are a myth so that Genesis 3 is irrelevant (when you try to interpretation creation *without* the Fall), when you live daily life as if there was no historical truth to the Fall and resulting consequence uttered by God Most High, you mingle the creation in perfection with the creation in a fallen state, original sin, sin gripping every generation and every person therein... and then to ‘fix’ this conflation of truths, you create another conflation of truths – justification and sanctification – and you convince yourself that if you just have great intentions, just live well enough, just live good enough, you can course-correct the problem. In fact, this is exactly what the principal fed to these students and their parents. His pep talk continued: “You did not enter this broken world just to die.... The world needs you. We need you. We need you at the age of 18; we need you at 24. That begins now. We need you.” You see, the intention is good: “live a good life and you’ll improve the world.” (A good *sanctification* thought.) But the implication is, “You young ones

are the unbroken who, with enough education, enough success, enough drive, will fix what is broken.” Yes, parents, who knew you were all raising little Messiahs?

In truth, the truth of the Fall proves all that good intention futile: “Dust you are, and unto dust you will return.” When you ignore the tragic reality of the Fall – not only once in history, but gripping every generation and every person – and when you can’t mention the true Messiah, you lead those around you to believe that the youngest among us are ‘the perfect,’ those not yet broken, those not yet ‘dust-bound’... the world’s hope to fix what is so noticeably broken about it.

Now, you might say, “Pastor, you’re being too rigid about this. The principal was just trying to give a pep talk and encourage them to try hard.” But doesn’t right theology – the Truth – matter in every aspect of life? What good is a pep talk if based in falsehood? Is God’s word and truth irrelevant to, out-of-bounds for the pep talks and the impressions we place upon our young ones, on ourselves, our daily-life expectations that the Fall is overcome-able *by* us, a generation, generational effort of our little Messiahs? And here’s the end result where this leads for a society:

What happens when those young ones – being taught a creation without the Fall, or even a “sick world” that can be healed by us, with a chance to create utopia in the world – what happens when they *do* their very best, when they try as hard as they can... and, when the world supposedly hinges on them getting A’s, the best

they can muster are Bs and Cs? And when you are heralded as a star (at work, in business, in the performing arts, on a sports team, in business), but it still doesn't change the world's march toward the dust or your place in that march? And when you do have great success, but it still doesn't fix what you see is noticeably wrong about you, and you realize you – like everyone else – are still going to die?

When the young ones realize that, those little Messiahs go from a head swelled with pride to a heart filled with despair – either that the world lied to them (so that they can't be whatever they want to be, can't even afford to buy a house or even a car) or that they completely let down the world that needed them.

Is it coincidence that this generation's suicide rate has skyrocketed and they would rather live in *virtual* reality, where they can actually *be* God and meet the needs of *their* world? What despair... to live with the dashed hopes of such pep talks: the world was broken, they were supposed to fix it, and instead it broke them... so that the *next* young generation must be our hope. What vapid hope! What empty hype!

This hype isn't new to this generation. Those of you who are my age or a bit older – Gen X or Baby Boomers, whatever society calls you – you recall what our answer was before thinking it was the little Messiahs among us. Our generation's answer was to depend on those who best illustrated our materialism: Hollywood! Our solution was to get all the stars together, great telethons (“Take that,

hunger!”) and have them sing,¹ “Heal the world. Make it a better place, for you and for me and the entire human race. There are people dying, if you care enough for the living, make a better place for you and for me.” What verbal vomit... but an important reminder to every generation here tonight that you have lived in a society (and will continue to live in a society) that denies the seriousness of God’s Word of *Truth*.

God’s words may not be nearly as much of a pep talk, may not sound nearly as inspiring or make people feel as good about themselves, but they are far more honest: “Dust you are, and unto dust you shall return.” Sin is *that* serious. God *created* you *for* life; but, on account of the Fall, you were born into this broken world just to die. That’s what the Fall did to you.

But, God would not let Sin or the Fall be the victor. He would rescue, redeem... one day will even resurrect. And it would not happen through you or through your children. All of justification (we’ll talk about sanctification, your daily life in it all... we’ll talk about that starting next week), but all of justification – the whole world’s fate and redemption and hope for any purpose beyond death – rests with the one true Messiah – ironically, the One who

¹ Here, I mis-cited the words for *USAforAfrica*. “Heal the World” was a 1991 release from Michael Jackson, who was also involved in *USAforAfrica*’s 1985 hit, “We are the world, we are the children, we are the ones who make a brighter day, so let’s start giving. There’s a choice we’re making, we’re saving our own lives. It’s true; we’ll make a better day, just you and me.”

(our social experiment says) cannot be named within the earshot of so many being driven to youthful pride and eventual despair.

But you have reason for hope precisely because of that name not only to be named *among* men, but that name which stands *above* all names – Jesus... He alone is the Messiah, the Christ of God, even if found upon the cross. He alone is the answer to the world's brokenness and reason that your birth into this broken world will not just end in death. Every detail of your existence matters *only* (it only has purpose and meaning and life) if that detail is accompanied by phrases like, "by Christ, in Christ, through Christ".... because only Christ Jesus fixes that which is broken... only Christ owns by right and self-righteousness that the Father would not leave His soul in the grave, but on account of His righteous sacrifice and substitution, would raise Him up from the dust and – one day – will include with him in that resurrection from the dust all who hoped in Him, all who were attached to Him.

That's what your baptism does. It does more than simply remove the need for ash from the head. It removes the very confession of that ash on the head. You see, the public confession of this Wednesday's ashes upon the forehead is not to tell the world you are a Christian... the confession of this Wednesday's ashes is *supposed to be* a confession to one's self that "I, I myself, am part of the Fall, condemned by the Fall, and therefore nothing more than dust." That's the *true* purpose of those ashes – not to confess 'out there' (where everyone can see you), but to bring tangible reminder

to that which ought be sober-mindedly confessed 'in here' (the heart): "Dust I am; to dust I will return... what good is any 'mark I leave on the world'? Is that the best I can hope? That I will be famous and people will remember me when I'm gone? That I'll have success and money *until* I'm gone? That 'great hope' still confesses the reality – I will be gone! And I won't have *fixed* anything! Because I'm not messiah. Instead, Dust I am, and unto dust I will return."

But, BAPTISM *into Christ*, baptism – which utterly depends on Christ, what's more is a gift *from* Christ, by Christ, to and upon you, bestowing upon you his very identity and all the inheritance of the cross... "Baptism now saves you" ... saves you from the dust, from the utter brokenness of being born to die, even from the despair of eventually having that self-pride crushed by the fact that your success, popularity, efforts did nothing to change the world's march toward the dust of condemnation.

Nevertheless, "I am baptized into Christ." And that changes everything, because HE changes everything. He justified you, rescued you, redeemed you, feeds you Himself – His very life!, and thus even gives purpose and meaning to daily life – a daily life lived *in Christ*, by Christ, through Christ. And that life, lived in Christ, not only rescues you from the broken world and defends you against the broken world and means you outlive the broken world, but also enables you to positively influence the broken world (not fix it, but you can influence it)... precisely by pointing it to Christ, precisely by shining

His light into its darkness and living out His purpose and meaning in its meaninglessness.

We'll dwell on that daily life in the series beginning next week; but for tonight, rejoice that you who were born into the Fall to die have now been born anew to live in Christ and with Christ, to be sustained by the grain offering and drink offering He Himself presented to the Father at the sacrificial altar of Calvary, that He may leave behind that grain offering and drink offering... more than that, may actually come, even this very night, and serve it to you – that bread and wine of heaven – that He may sustain you in that baptismal life that attaches you to His cross and rescues you from a broken and dying world.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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