

SERMON FOR ASH WEDNESDAY 2021**TEXT: GENESIS 2: 7-9; 3: 17-24****THEME: HIGH LOVE DOWN IN THE DUST**

7 then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. **8** And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. **9** And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. **17** And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; **18** thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. **19** By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

In the name of Jesus:

Ashes to ashes and dust to dust. Today, Ash Wednesday is the day when many Christians around the world are marked with ashes on their foreheads, hearing the words from their pastor: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." As we begin this holy season of Lent, we reflect upon our brokenness and sinfulness. Lent is a time for a spiritual spring cleaning, a time of repenting of our sins, the sins against others and against God. Lent is also a time for meditating on the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, and for beholding in Jesus, just how much God loves us. That is the point of the sermons this Lenten season, to consider and explore God's enormous love toward us. To hear and reflect upon the hugeness of His mercy and

compassion, a love that never ends. His love is revealed to us in both Old and New Testaments, where God says to Moses: “Yahweh, Yahweh, a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in merciful love” [Ex 34:6]. In the Psalms, the Old Testament worshippers exulted: “As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love for those who fear him” [Ps 103:11]. And in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul marvels that although we and all mankind were “dead in trespasses and sins,” there is hope, because, Paul writes, God is “rich in mercy” [Eph 2:4]

It has become a cliché, perhaps, an empty sounding, bumper-sticker slogan. God loves you. Jesus loves you. But there is nothing empty or clichéd about the living God, and the ways that he has loved us and continues to love us and will love us forever. Today we reflect on God’s high love that reaches down into the dust, literally, to have us and to help us. This is what our text speaks to tonight.

Think about it, from handfuls of dust and dirt, God made a living human being, created in the image of God. He took dust, and he breathed into it the breath of life, and that dust became a human, and blinked his eyes and opened his mouth in wonder and praise. But because of human rebellion and sin, because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve and you and me, God’s decree is that Adam and every other human must die. We must return to the dust and

the dirt from which God first formed us. Every one of us will die, must die, unless Jesus returns first. Every one of us will return to dust—or ashes, for those who are cremated. Every one of us must return to the ground. This is a pretty self evident truth. It is sobering to hear. It's sobering for parents to hear these words as ashes are placed on their children's foreheads. But it is true, for each and every one of us. This dose of reality should move us to repent. And it should move us to joy. Because we are marked with the cross of Christ, who loves us and saves us from sin, Satan, and death.

Throughout the Bible, dust and ashes are associated with repentance. Job repented in dust and ashes. The straggling remnant left after Jerusalem was destroyed, sat down on the ground and poured dust on their heads. After listening to Jonah, the king of Nineveh sat down in a pile of ashes. Dust and ashes convey repentance, humility, and mourning over sin. Why dust? Why ashes? What is dust? What are ashes? Dust and ashes are the stuff of utter destruction, nothingness, and worthlessness. All that stood, all that was built up, all that was seemingly strong and secure and even magnificent, is torn down, burned down, destroyed, undone. Think of the mushrooming cloud of dust and ashes from an atomic bomb. Whatever was in its path is now dust and ash. Think of the billowing waves of dust and ash from the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Or the dusty rubble and ashes of Jerusalem's charred

ruins, when God sent the armies of Babylon against it. Dust and ashes, it is what has become of every human being who has ever lived. Men had defied God, turned away from God, oppressed others, and exalted themselves. They refused to acknowledge their sin, to humble themselves, and to seek God's mercy and help. And so God declared their end: dust and ashes. He warned them and he threatened them (no empty threat!). It was much like the sentence pronounced on Adam: "You are dust, and to dust you will return." This is God's sober sentence pronounced to us, today: "You are dust, and to dust you will return."

But that is not the end. There is Good News, a rest of the story. God reaches down into the dust and gives life to sinners. On the sixth day of creation God reached down from heaven and breathed into man and gave him the breath of life.. Adam had nothing, deserved nothing, but received life a gift from God.

And this same God reaches down from heaven to you today to give you life. He is still this God for you. He helps his people in any low and desperate situation. This is the Good News of Christmas that we celebrated six weeks ago. God became man in Jesus Christ, God became a creature of clay, to live for you. You are dust, and you will return to the dust, but God's high love will preserve you forever. He offered up His Son as your Substitute, Jesus died and was

buried, but His body did not decay. On the third day God rose His Son from the grave to defeat sin, Satan, and death for you. And God will one day reach down into the dust again, into your grave, into your dust, and he will raise your body up again. In love, God will give shape to your dust. In love, he will breathe into your lifeless corpse the breath of life. In love, he will reach down and draw you up to share in the joy of Jesus's own resurrection. We who are dust will share in Jesus's glory and life, all because Jesus set aside his glory and laid down his life, to share in our dust and our death. The one who created us from the dust in love, was himself crucified and buried because of hate. The one who created us from the dust in love, staggered and fell into the dust, pressed down under the weight of the cross that he carried. The one who created us from the dust in love, hung on that cross in pain and shame and nakedness, covered only in dust and blood. The one who created us from the dust in love, poured out his blood for those who would not know him, and his blood ran down his face, his arms, his sides, his legs, and dripped down into the dust below. And from that dust, his blood cries out. From that dust, his blood speaks out in love, "Father, forgive them, pardon them, restore them, resurrect them, for I have shed my blood for the forgiveness of their sins."

Dear friends, God loves you. God's love for you is so high that he reaches down into the dust to have you, and to help you. Back in the first week of the world,

when God scooped up that dirt, he looked ahead to the resurrection. As God scooped up that dirt to form Adam, he knew that the day would come when he would do this for Adam again, for all his children, for you. As God scooped up that dirt to form Adam, he also knew what it would cost, the lifeblood of the divine Son. Behold his great love for you, even then. And so the Father bent down, and the Son at his side, creating with him, reaching down into the dirt so that he might have you, so that he might help you, so that he might love you. May he grant to you true repentance and full joy in his love, this Lent. May he give you confidence, come what may, that his high love will lift up from the ash heap, and one day raise you from the dust. "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him . . . As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust, thanks be to God.

Amen.