

February 6, 2008 – Ash Wednesday
Augustana Lutheran Church of Hyde Park
Rev. Elizabeth Musselman

Texts: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 / Psalm 103 / 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 / Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Hymn: “Out of the Depths I Cry to You” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #600)

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

We began our service tonight with the words of Psalm 51: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. . . . Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. . . . Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.”

Ash Wednesday is the one day of the year when Christians are probably the *most* honest about the human condition—when we purposely and publicly recognize our sinfulness and our mortality, lining up to receive ashen crosses on our foreheads. It’s a day when we acknowledge that we’re so bound up in sin that we can not save ourselves. And Ash Wednesday is the day when we come closest to the prophet Joel’s vision of communal lament, a solemn assembly where the young and the old gather to grieve our human failures and to hope for something better. *Rend your hearts. Return to the Lord your God.* At the beginning of our Lenten journey is repentance, and we repent together tonight when we mark our faces with those ashes. *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

These words come from the beginning of Genesis, and they remind us that the ashes of Ash Wednesday are situated within a much larger story. It’s a story that begins with a tree in the middle of a garden, a tree that bears not only fruit but also the

knowledge of good and evil. And the man and the woman pluck some fruit from the tree and they eat it. And do you remember what God says to them after they eat the fruit? “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). These words remind us not only that we’re sinful, but also that we’re mortal. People of dust, created out of dust, we will also return to dust.

At Augustana these days, we’re well acquainted with dust and ashes. We see the ashes of our loved ones each week during the coffee hour as we gaze out the window at our Memorial Garden. And we experience with one another over and over again the dusty fragility of the human body: this week it’s with Corrine and Morry, as Morry approaches the end of his hospice care. Dust and ashes.

And we who are made of dust gather tonight around a container full of ashes, and these ashes are also situated within a larger story. The particular ashes we use tonight come from a tree in Florida, in memory of a tree outside of Jerusalem. The Jerusalem tree, thousands of years ago, had long branches that provided shade in the hot, dry months of summer. As Jesus approached the city on a donkey, some men and some women plucked the branches from this tree and covered the road before Jesus with these branches and shouted “hosanna!” The palm branches tell a story of the glory of Christ, but we know that it’s a glory tempered by immanent suffering and death. On Palm Sunday we know that Jesus will be hung from a tree and left to die, and it’s *his* cross with which our foreheads are marked tonight.

These ashes that mark us tonight come from a palm tree in Florida, whose branches were plucked off about a year ago and sent to Watra Church Goods at Archer

Avenue and 42nd Street on the south side of Chicago, and then they were sent to Augustana Lutheran Church of Hyde Park, where on a Sunday morning last spring the whole congregation re-enacted the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem. If you were here last year on Palm Sunday, you probably held one of these branches in your hand and waved it around while singing the entrance hymn, “All Glory, Laud, and Honor.” Do you remember? Did you think last year, while you were waving your palm branch, that one year later these same palm branches would mark your forehead with an ashen cross? Did you know last year, while you were singing “All Glory, Laud, and Honor,” that the Hebrew word for *glory* means, at its root, *weight* or *heaviness*?—because the God of glory is also a God who takes on the heaviness of the human condition, and who eventually will bear the heavy weight of the cross.

And so tonight we’re marked with the cold, oily ashes of these Florida palm branches, which were stored in the sacristy for nearly a year, until last Thursday afternoon when Leann Pace and Clinton Moyer stood in the churchyard, right next to our Memorial Garden—and as the snow was falling from the sky, Clinton and Leann burned the palms into ashes to remind us of our sin and our mortality. *Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Return to the Lord, your God.*

The ashes that mark us tonight signify repentance, and the meaning of repentance in both the Hebrew and the Greek has to do with “turning around.” Making a radical change. Turning our backs on sin. Turning our backs on death. And there is no way that we can do this turning around on our own! The Psalmist understands this when he writes in Psalm 51: “have mercy on me, O God, and blot out my transgressions.” And then we

hear the rest of the story in Psalm 103: “As far as the east is from the west, so far have you removed our transgressions from us . . . O Lord. For you know well how we are formed; you remember that we are but dust.” We can repent and fast all we want, in public or in private, but our repentance and our fasting are not what saves us. It’s a God of mercy who saves us.

And so we wear the cross on our foreheads tonight to remind us of this larger story, to remind us that even when we repent and fast, we do so as mortal humans and as sinners, utterly dependent upon God’s mercy. The cold, gritty, ashen cross that will disfigure each of our faces—it reminds us that during this season of Lent, it’s appropriate for us to approach God and one another with a sense of our sinfulness and with cries of penitence. It’s appropriate for us to fast and pray and give alms and work for justice. But even that will not be enough. We are sinners from our birth, who constantly fail. And we are mortals, who will someday die. Like Adam and Eve, like Steve K. and Tom Z., like Morry—we are dust, and to dust we shall return.

Dear people of dust, sinful and mortal, marked with the cross: remember that tonight’s cross is not the first cross on your forehead, nor will it be the last cross on your forehead. The first cross was the one you received at your baptism, and that baptismal cross is also part of a larger story. *Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. Forever.* These oily ashes tonight will sit on top of the indelible cross that marks each of us already. “Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” Sinful even before we are born, yes—but also sealed by the Holy Spirit. And *forever*. Forever may seem strange for people made of dust, but it points us forward to the final cross that will be placed on our foreheads someday before we return

to dust. *For if we have been united with him in a death like his, surely we shall be united with him in a resurrection like his.* Morry and his family know this already, as they watch and wait.

And the theologian Karl Rahner knew it, when he wrote these words about Ash Wednesday: “When on Ash Wednesday we hear the words, ‘Remember, you are dust,’ we are also told that we are brothers and sisters of the incarnate Lord. In these words we are told everything that we are: nothingness that is filled with eternity; death that teems with life; futility that redeems; dust that is God’s life forever” [Karl Rahner, *The Eternal Year* (London: Burns & Oates, 1964), p. 62].

And the apostle Paul knew it when he wrote to the Corinthians those words that we just heard: “We are treated as sorrowful, and yet, we are always rejoicing. We are treated as poor, yet making many rich. We are treated as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. We are treated as if we were dying, and yet, see—we are alive!”

This is our story. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. Forgiveness out of sin; hope out of ashes. Glory into suffering into glory. Having nothing, and yet possessing everything. Dust that is God’s life forever. Amen.