

# ASH WEDNESDAY

February 17, 2021

## INVOCATION

Pastor: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

**People: Amen.**

## CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

Pastor: If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

**People: But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**

Pastor: Let us then confess our sins to God our Father.

**All: Most merciful God, we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We justly deserve your present and eternal punishment. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways to the glory of your holy name. Amen.**

Pastor: Almighty God in his mercy has given his Son to die for you and for his sake forgives you all your sins. As a called and ordained servant of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

**All: Amen**

## PRAYER OF THE DAY

Pastor: The Lord be with you.

**People: And also with you.**

Pastor: Let us pray. Almighty and everlasting God, You despise nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and contrite hearts that lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness we may receive from You full pardon and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**People: Amen.**

## READING *Psalm 103*

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. The Lord works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. 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. As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments. The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all. Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word! Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will! Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul!

## SERMON

What's the *first* thing that comes to your mind when you hear "Ash Wednesday"? Ashes, right! Ashes are black. They remind us of the blackness of sin. What's the *next* thing that comes to your mind when you hear "Ash Wednesday"? Probably Lent, right? Lent starts today, a season of repentance from the blackness of sin. Today, we will focus on the words "dust," and "remember."

There's a big difference between God's remembering and our remembering. When we remember something, too often it's like one person saying, "You forgot my birthday" and another replying, "No. I remembered your birthday. I just didn't do anything about it." When God remembers, He does something about it. God remembers and acts graciously toward us. When God causes us to remember something, He also causes us to do something. He causes us to believe. He causes us to receive, by faith, his gracious gifts.

In our psalm for today, the psalmist writes, God **"knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust"**. When ashes are applied on Ash Wednesday, these words are traditionally spoken: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." We don't always remember that we are dust. So we can't or don't do anything about it. But God remembers and does something about it. Our text says, **"As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him"** (v 13). God Remembers That People Are Dust So That He Shows Compassion.

God "knows our frame." God knows exactly how we are made because God made us. God crafted human life by hand. He knitted us together in our mother's womb. Everything else was created by God saying, **"let there be"** and the power of His Word brought the thing He said into existence. But the highlight and crown of God's creation—the creation of human life—was different. In Gen 2:7, we read **"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."** At the end of that day, **"God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good"** (Gen 1:31). Being made from dust wasn't a bad thing. It was "very good."

But sin came. It drastically changed everything. Sin ruined everything. Even from that ruined condition, however, Ps 139:14 urges praise to God because people are still **"fearfully and wonderfully made."** When you think of those two things, "dust" and "wonderfully made," try to picture in your mind the works of art made by Andrew Clemens of McGregor, Iowa. His pieces aren't made of dust, but they're close to that. They're made of sand. They are so wonderfully detailed that they look like a picture painted on the outside of a bottle. But they're made of differently colored grains of sand placed one grain at a time through the neck of the bottle! I can't imagine how difficult that would be. I'm lucky if I don't hit a few keys trying to text. One of these pieces of sand art that he created took over two years to make. The faces and designs on it were almost as clear as a photograph. Some of these works of sand were appraised at up to fifty thousand dollars! Handle that sand very gently, right? Whatever you do, don't shake that bottle!

With that picture in mind, remember that people are like sand . . . like dust. However, people are dust that God has arranged and appraised at a high value. Sometimes God's people forgot that their value came from God, from His creating hand, from His wonderful design. They tried to live without God, separate from Him. They even turned to other "gods," idols they formed with their own hands. They'd come a long way, from being handmade by their God to making their gods *by hand*. They could not, however, escape the fact that they were dust, because even that wonderfully made dust would go back to dust. The bottle would be shaken! Gen 3:19 is clear: **"for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."** But even in death, *God remembers that people are dust so that He shows compassion.*

What about us? Do we tend to forget that we are dust? Do we remember how "fearfully and wonderfully" God made us? Do we praise him for it? Or do we think that we are wonderful on our own, without God? We find it offensive when we're told that over millions of years we evolved from some lower form of animal. That is offensive because it's not true. The truth, however, is not very flattering either. You came from dust! Even though we put a little of it on our foreheads, or have done so in the past on Ash Wednesday, do we really believe that we are dust and ashes? Or do we think the word of God in Galatians 6:3 applies only to someone else? **"For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself."** We can deceive ourselves for a long time, but at some point, this dust will return to dust. But even in death, and perhaps especially at that time of greatest need, when even the strongest person can do nothing at all, *God remembers that people are dust so that He shows compassion.*

God remembered that people were dust. But they were *His* dust, His people, His children. So God dealt with his people with compassion, as a father deals with his child. God remembers that His people are dust and very fragile dust at that. He doesn't shake them up and pour them out and start over again. First, God moved his people to realize their nature—that they were dust and helpless apart from him. Listen to how God led Abraham to pray in Genesis 18:27: **“I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes”**. When the whole country “broke faith” with God and were defeated in battle, **“they put dust on their heads”** according to Joshua 7:6. When Job had all his troubles, his friends **“tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven”** (Job 2:12).

When trouble comes, God remembers that people are dust, and He has ways to make His people remember that too. When God caused the people to remember that they were dust, He caused them to do something. God caused them to repent. When God remembered, He also did something. He had compassion. God forgave his people who looked to him . . . who repented in dust and ashes. Ps 113:7 says, **“He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap.”** We see God's compassion best in Jesus, though. In Matthew 9:36, the Apostle records, **“When he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”** In Matthew 14:14, we hear, **“When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.”** Jesus remembered that people were dust, felt sorry for them because of their need, and did something about that need. His compassion took him all the way to the cross and to death. *God remembers that people are dust so that He shows compassion.*

God also has ways of working in our lives to cause us to remember that we are dust. When times of trouble and great need come, God uses that trouble and need to turn us around so that we think and pray like Abraham, **“I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes”** (Gen 18:27). Then we ask God to be gracious toward us and have compassion on us, because even though we are sinful, we are still the detailed and wonderful and valuable crown of God's creation! God remembers that we are dust, but He handles His dust very carefully!

When things shake and threaten God's work of dust art, He handles us gently, with compassion. In one way, we are still dust creatures like Adam, but in another way, we are heavenly creatures like Jesus. St. Paul makes this connection in 1 Cor 15:47–48: **“The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven.”** God remembers that we are dust, but God sees us through Jesus, and that makes us very special dust . . . heavenly dust. Not on our own, but in Christ, we are a new creation. God compassionately and gently arranges us so that we “are of heaven” even while we are here on earth. *God remembers that people are dust so that He shows compassion.*

It is true we are dust, but we are God's dust. It's also true that money can't buy life. But the precious blood of Christ has bought us eternity and forgiveness. Today we see dust and ashes. God's Word leads us to repent and receive forgiveness. What a change takes place! In Christ, the Scripture is fulfilled, and we now have, as Isaiah says, **“a beautiful headdress instead of ashes”** (Is 61:3). Amen.

## LORD'S PRAYER

Pastor: Lord, remember us in Your kingdom and teach us to pray:

**People: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven; give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.**

## BENEDICAMUS AND BENEDICTION

Pastor: Let us bless the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

Pastor: The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you.

The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace. *Numbers 6:24–26*

**People: Amen.**