

Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2009

Joint Service with and at Christ the King Lutheran Church

**“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”**

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Cheery thought, isn't it? People come to churches all over the world tonight to hear these words and perhaps to actually receive a token of dust on their foreheads, a token of their *mortality*, a token of something that is all too real but which we still often do not take seriously.

Seat belts? Life insurance? Bicycle helmets? A will? Guardians for minor children? Healthy diet and exercise? Those are all for *other* people, don't you know. “*We* don't need them,” plenty of people say – not us, not now, not yet.

And perhaps this ritual we and so many others observe every Ash Wednesday is too *familiar*, domesticated, *ritualized* for it to really sink in.

Suppose that, instead of Pastor Schott and me standing behind the altar in white robes with stoles around our necks, there were two *doctors* standing behind the altar in white lab coats with stethoscopes around their necks. And instead of kneeling or standing in front of familiar, comforting clergy who put their thumbs on our foreheads and say, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” suppose we all knelt or stood before two unfamiliar doctors who put their thumbs on each of our foreheads and said, “Your biopsy result is in. It's Stage IV.”

That would get our attention. Even if we knew it was a ritual and not a result. And if I'm being all too real for some of us who are here tonight, I apologize, but this phrasing unmasks the reality behind the ritual: *we are all mortal*. We will all die. We, like Adam, are made of dust and the breath of God, and to dust we shall return.

Some of you, like me, may have been handed a box or an urn by a funeral director holding the ashes of someone you knew well and loved deeply. This phrase from the Ash Wednesday liturgy in that case is all too vivid. And some of you may have mourned someone whose cremation was not a matter of personal choice or family wishes but simply *what happened*. On the patio at St. Barnabas is a bench dedicated to the memory of a young, healthy husband and father, Stephen Joseph, and all the others who died September 11, 2001. We never even got his ashes. His office was above where one of the planes hit. His ashes are forever mixed with the remains of The World Trade Center.

Is this enough reality for one sermon?

Ash Wednesday is a reality check. And Ash Wednesday is already uncomfortable enough so that it's no wonder the crowd tonight is a whole lot less than the crowds will be at either of our churches on Easter. Sunshine! Lilies! New hats! Chocolate eggs! Resurrection from the dead?

Without death, there can be no resurrection. Unless we happen to be among those who are still alive when Christ returns to earth *and he saves us, we will all die and whether we live afterwards in any sense is totally up to God.* So on Ash Wednesday, we are asked to face our mortality, our ultimate powerlessness before our mortality at some point, and, oh, yes, our sinfulness. Did I forget to mention that? We all fall short of the glory of God, a lot further short than the elevation of Sand Hill is short of the elevation of Mt. Everest. There are things we have done and, oh, yes, things we ought to have done but just never quite got around to doing.

And without God's help, we can all look in the mirror and see dust. Ashes. Our own ashes.

And yet *this* service is the beginning of the preparation Christians make for *Easter*. How do we go from *here* – Mortality, sin and powerlessness – to there?

When Pastor Schott and I touch each others' foreheads, and yours, with ashes, it won't be to make random smudges. We apply these ashes, made from burned palms from Palm Sundays past, to the foreheads of believers *with the sign of the cross*. Look in the mirror tonight when you get home and a cross, more or less, is what you should see.

*Just like the cross on your forehead when you were baptized* and put under the guardianship of Jesus Christ.

Baptism we all know means new life. But the Ash Wednesday cross of ashes reminds us of new life in Christ when we most need to be reminded of it: when we come uncomfortably close to acknowledging our mortality, our sinfulness and our ultimate dependence on the grace and mercy of God when it comes to our ultimate fates.

No, Easter isn't *this* Sunday. That would be too quick and easy. We human beings, maybe especially long-time clergy to whom these rituals may get too familiar, need more time to be reminded how much we need God. We do need God, and thank God, God knows that.

**That's why Jesus showed up for work.**

Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly."

**(The Rev.) Francis A. Hubbard**

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