

Ash Wednesday Sermon –

“Ashes to ashes and dust to dust.” These words are words from a committal service that we may hear read. Sometimes the pastor pours a handful of dirt over the casket as a reminder that we are mortal human beings.

This evening we wear a cross of ashes on our forehead with the words spoken, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.” This is a reminder that we are mortal human beings that have death as our ever present reminder. But, the cross is a reminder that our Savior Jesus suffered death, taking all our sins, and bearing our guilt, and dying in our place, receiving the full wrath of the almighty God.

From dust we were created and to dust we will return because sin entered our world through the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Death came upon all people, because death is the wage or the consequence of sin. There is no escape from it. However, there is hope.

Sin, missing the mark, falling short of the glory of God, whatever we want to call it, sin destroys. We all sin. We are sinners. There is no one who is without sin or who does not sin in thought, word, or deed. That is what we confess before God.

Martin Luther teaches that in confession, we look at the Ten Commandments and see that we are unable to keep them as God intended. Breaking one part breaks the whole. Therefore, none of us can stand before God on our own merit. As St. Paul reminds us in Romans 6:23, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

The ashen cross on our forehead is also a reminder of what Pastor Haack mentioned in his sermon at my installation – remembering that we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are walking wet because of what God has done for us. making the sign of the cross reminds us that we are God’s people, children of the heavenly Father. So, even though we walk this journey in Lent, we are always focused upon the resurrection victory.

Without the cross there is no crown and so we must travel this path with our Lord Jesus Christ to understand what it means for God’s love to be given in so deep a way as to send his own Son to take the sin of the whole world upon his shoulders and be crucified, bearing the full punishment of sin in our place – the vicarious atoning sacrifice of the Lamb of God that was slain. We are touched by God this evening through the means of an ashen cross, but also through the bread and wine we receive this evening. In this very receiving of bread and wine, we receive the very body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ – the assurance that sin and death have no power over

us. We are in Christ and Christ is in us. We now walk worthy of that inter relationship and live according to God's holy will.

Throughout this Lenten season we will view a king of Israel and review the challenges that life offers. Yet, we will also see God's grace and mercy be revealed in and through the encounter with the holy God. Tonight we see David – the King of Israel. King David's story is familiar to most of us – a shepherd boy selected by God through Samuel to be designated as king. We know the story of David's great battle with Goliath. We also know the story of David's adulterous encounter with Bathsheba. It's a telling story of wrongful acts enveloped with sin. It wasn't until the confrontation by Nathan, the prophet, that David laid bare his soul before God.

In Psalm 51 we read of David's plea before God. Listen to these words of David as they can be found in the front section of the hymnbook.

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! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

And now skip over to the next page where we continue to read these familiar words:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

And then at verse 12 we read together, “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

As David laid bare his soul before God, we also come before God acknowledging our sin and receiving from God his abundant mercy and grace – the forgiveness of all our sin. Just as David was forgiven by God's mercy, so we are forgiven by God's mercy. With David's own words we can come before our heavenly Father and confess our sin and receive his pronouncement of forgiveness.

We pray, Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. Amen.