

Matthew 6:16–21
Ash Wednesday
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
February 22, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

“Dust you are and to dust you shall return.” Every Ash Wednesday, as the penitential season of Lent begins, we are reminded of our mortality. We are reminded that because we are sinners, we will die. We hear the same curse that was spoken upon Adam spoken upon us, the descendants of Adam: dust you are, and to dust you shall return. The LORD God had formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature (Gen 2:7). But after man disobeyed God and fell into sin, the LORD said to him: “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” (Gen 3:19). Every Ash Wednesday, we are especially reminded that as sinners, we must someday die and return to the dust. The wages of sin is death.

So why is it “Ash Wednesday” and not “Dust Wednesday”? Why do we mark our foreheads with ashes instead of dust? In Scripture, there’s a close connection between dust and ashes and repentance. Job says: “I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6). When Abraham interceded for the city of Sodom, about to be destroyed by fire, he said: “Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes” (Gen 18:27). You could say that dust and ashes are pretty much the same thing. Both are the components of life destroyed. Time will turn you into dust and fire will turn you into ashes. So both dust and ashes represent God’s judgment against our sin, a judgment carrying with it the death sentence. That’s why

someday people will come to your funeral and hear those words at your graveside: “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

In the Old Testament, people would show their repentance by putting on sackcloth, the simplest clothing. The humble garment was supposed to represent the penitent’s humility before God. The penitent would then put ashes on his head and sit in the dust to show his repentance, his sorrow over sin. Daniel sought the LORD “by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes,” (Dan 9:3) confessing that he and the people had rebelled against the LORD and turned aside from His commandments. Jesus pronounced woes upon the people of Chorazin and Bethsaida, saying: “if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes” (Matt 11:21). Sackcloth and dust and ashes were a way of showing humility before God and recognizing that sin deserves nothing but punishment and death for what has been done and for what has been left undone. “Dust you are, and to dust you shall return.”

Besides ashes and the reminder that we will return to the dust, another part of Lent that reminds us of our mortality—and the sin that drives us there—is the Christian discipline of fasting. In German, the name for Lent is “Fastenzeit,” a time of fasting, or not eating any food for a certain amount of time. On Sunday, we’ll hear how Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights, which is a pattern for our forty day “time of fasting,” called Lent. Oftentimes people will “give up” something for Lent, maybe a food or beverage they particularly enjoy, or a bad habit they want to drop. This can be a good practice of Christian self-discipline, especially when it leads to an increased focus on God’s Word.

In Scripture, however, fasting really means giving up all food for a certain period of time. That could mean giving up a certain kind of food, yes, but it’s really in giving up meals or not

eating at all on certain days that the practice of fasting is able to fulfill its true purpose. And the purpose of fasting is to remind us of our dependence on God for everything we need to support this body and life. When we feel the pangs of hunger, we learn how creaturely we really are. As part of God's creation, we live within a certain order that requires us to eat. At the same time, fasting leads us to recognize that "man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4). Without God's creative word, food would have no power to nourish us. So fasting leads us to depend more on God's Word as the source of our life than on anything else we think we might need, including food.

With an emphasis on fasting during Lent, we also do well to pay attention to what our Lord says in the appointed Gospel reading for today. "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others." The purpose of fasting and any other Christian discipline is not to be seen by others. This season is not about pridefully trying to be better than other Christians, or better than the children of this world. No, the point of fasting and repentance is the exact opposite of that. We fast to remind ourselves of how weak we are, not how strong we are. We repent not because we're great people. We repent because we are sinners who can't do anything on our own for our salvation. Instead, we turn to the LORD, recognizing that only the one who created us is also able to give us new hearts and new minds in Christ Jesus.

Jesus says of those who fast to be seen by others that "they have received their reward." That is, they do what they do to be seen by others, so that's exactly what they get. Maybe they earn the praise of others or a pat on the back from themselves. But that's the extent of it. Instead, Jesus says: "when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will

reward you.” Just like giving to the poor or praying, the benefits we receive from fasting are between us and our Father in Heaven. We do not exalt ourselves before others by comparing ourselves to them. Instead, we humble ourselves before the LORD, that He might exalt us (James 4:10).

As part of our Lenten discipline this year, we will focus on the creation account from Genesis 1 during our midweek Lenten services. This idea goes back to a genre of literature in church history based on the “Hexaemeron,” or the six days of creation. Around the year of our LORD 370, St. Basil of Caesarea, who lived in what is today the country of Turkey, preached a series of Lenten sermons on the days of creation. Other church fathers followed in St. Basil’s footsteps, including St. Ambrose and St. Augustine. The Hexaemeron genre remained popular throughout the Middle Ages and Reformation era until the 17th century, when those who considered themselves “enlightened” began looking down on the miraculous parts of Scripture, including the creation account.

But as we’ll see over the next six weeks, a deep understanding of the days of creation is important for understanding the rest of the Bible. The themes we find in the creation narrative show up throughout the Bible. And as we make connections between creation and new creation, we’ll see that Jesus Christ is the center and the focal point of everything. All things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, were created by the Son of God. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together (Col 1:17), in creation and in Scripture as well. In contemplating God’s work of creation, we’ll be prepared for God’s work of re-creation in the resurrection of Jesus Christ at Easter.

“Dust you are, and to dust you shall return.” During Lent we are reminded that though we were created good and perfect by God, we have lost that state of original blessedness and are

now subject to the curse that comes with sin—the curse of death. In fasting from food and other luxuries, we are reminded of our mortality and of our utter dependance on God and on His Word. But we are also reminded that our Lord Jesus took our curse upon Himself and became sin for us by dying on a tree, that He might restore to us new life, immortality, and blessedness by His rising from the dead. During this period of humble repentance preparing for the joy of Easter, we live out anew the pattern of humiliation and exaltation in Jesus’s death for our sins on Good Friday and then in His resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday. We repent of our sins during this season of Lent as we look forward to celebrating the paschal feast with joy, and ultimately, as we look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the eternal feast in the life of the world to come. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.