

Matthew 6:16–21
Ash Wednesday
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
February 14, 2024

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.” Our observance of Ash Wednesday and with it the beginning of the season of Lent opens with a reminder of our mortality, a reminder of the fact that one day you will die. 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. After the fall into sin, the ground was cursed and so was man who had been taken from that ground. God said to Adam: “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.” You, too, were formed out of the dust and to dust you shall return. Job says to the LORD: “Your hands fashioned and made me, and now you have destroyed me altogether. Remember that you have made me like clay. And will you return me to the dust?” (Job 10:8–9). Yes, the LORD will return all sinners to the dust from which they came, including you. With Job, we say: “I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6). And with Abraham we undertake to speak with the LORD, we who are but dust and ashes (Gen 18:27). Remember, O man, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

The ashes placed upon your forehead remind you of where you’ve come from and where you are going. But tonight we are also reminded that we will not remain in dust and ashes. You came from the dust and you will return to the dust because the wages of sin is death. The first man, Adam, was from the earth, a man of dust. But the second man, Jesus, is from heaven. As

was the man of dust, so also are you who are of the dust. And as is the man of heaven, so also are you who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. In Adam, all die. But in Jesus Christ, all live. The LORD who created you from the dust became Himself a man of dust for your sake. He took upon Himself your sin, the very cause of your returning to the dust from which you came. He took upon Himself your sin and it died with Him on the cross. The man of dust who is also the man of heaven was laid into the tomb. Dust returns to dust. Yet on the third day, his perishable body put on the imperishable. His mortal body put on immortality. Death was swallowed up in victory.

Baptized into Jesus Christ, all these blessings become yours as well. On Ash Wednesday, you are reminded that you are dust and to dust you shall return. You are born in the image and likeness of your father, Adam. All who are born in the natural way inherit the sin of our first parents. In Adam, you are condemned to death. But in Jesus Christ, you have life. As is the man from heaven, so are those who are born from heaven, born in the waters of Holy Baptism. Dust returns to dust. Yet in Jesus Christ, your perishable body will put on the imperishable. Your mortal body will become immortal. Your death is swallowed up in victory, because on the Last Day you will rise from the dead, triumphing over death forever.

During the season of Lent, we focus on repenting of our sins, mortifying our sinful desires, and turning again to the LORD. Death is still painful. You can feel this every time a loved one dies or when you consider your own death. And the sting of death is sin. We die for the sins that we've committed. And the power of sin is the Law. We know we are sinners because God's Law shows us our sin. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus fulfills the Law of God perfectly. He takes our sin upon Himself and triumphs

over death in His resurrection. In Jesus, we move from victory to victory. The sorrows of Lent are soon followed by the joy of Easter.

Therefore be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. The season of Lent gives opportunity to refocus our lives and root out the weeds of sin that have grown up. In German, the name for the season of Lent is Fastenzeit, the “time of fasting.” Fasting means not eating. Jesus says: “When you fast . . .” The implication is that there are times when you will be fasting, whether that means completely, by not eating anything on certain days of the week, or partially, by foregoing certain meals, or at the very least giving something up that you might otherwise enjoy. Fasting is another reminder that you are dust and to dust you shall return. When you begin to feel the pangs of hunger, you start to realize how weak and mortal you truly are. And you begin to recognize more of God’s creation as the gift it truly is.

On average it takes 30–60 days to break a bad habit. Interesting that this fits perfectly with the 40 day season of Lent. In fact, maybe the length of time to break a habit comes from the ancient custom of fasting for the 40 days of Lent. We’re conditioned to take about this much time to rewire our brains. This 40 day season of Lent is the perfect time not only to fast from food, but to fast from whatever bad habits have crept into our life. Now is the time to give up the burdens that have been weighing you down, or the sinful habits you regularly fall into. Now is a chance to repent, to turn to the LORD and with His help mend your ways.

Of course, simply fasting or giving something up for Lent is just the first part of the equation. If something good doesn’t replace what is removed, there is a danger of falling right back into old habits or worse. If you’re not eating on certain days or at certain times, then use that time to focus on reading God’s Word. (If you read one chapter a day, starting today, you can

get through both Matthew and Mark). Remind yourself that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Let the sensations of hunger remind you of your utter dependence on God. If you're giving up old sins or bad habits, find ways to redirect the old patterns you fall into. And instead turn to the LORD in His Word and in prayer.

Prayer is the second Lenten discipline you can focus on this season. Our temptation is to turn to prayer as the last resort instead of the first resort. Our prayer life is always in danger of slipping and prayer is one of the easiest practices to neglect when life gets too busy. It needs to be the opposite. Resolve this season to pray more often. Pray when you wake up in the morning and when you go to bed at night. Pray before and after meals. Look for situations throughout the day you can take to the Lord in prayer. And if you need help with learning to pray, start simply. Begin with the prayer Jesus taught us, the Lord's Prayer. And the prayer book of the Bible, the Psalter. Pray Luther's morning, evening, and mealtime prayers. Use the scripturally based prayers in the Lutheran Prayer Companion to guide you and give form and substance to your daily prayers.

Besides fasting and prayer, the third discipline the church focuses on during Lent is almsgiving, or giving money to the poor. Look for ways this Lenten season to help others. Give what you have in acts of self sacrifice, recognizing that nothing you have is your own. Everything is a gift from God to be used in His service. You'll be surprised at how freeing it is to go above and beyond your usual giving to support the needs of others.

The Lenten disciplines of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are no Law, however. Nobody is requiring you to do these things. In fact, Jesus tells us in our Gospel lesson tonight that if your goal even internally is to do these things to be seen by others then you will receive your reward in this life, but not in the life to come. Instead, use this time to focus on the places God wants

you to grow and resolve to do them privately. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you. He will draw You closer to Himself. He will remind you through these practices that you are dust and that to dust you shall return. He will remind you of your mortality and the sin that weighs you down. He will remind you of your weaknesses, your laziness, and your self-centeredness. But He will also remind you that Jesus, who once destroyed sin in the flesh, is now destroying sin in your flesh. Repent of your sins daily this Lenten season. Mortify the desires of your flesh. Return to the LORD and He will renew your strength in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. 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.