

Genesis 3:19

The world much prefers Fat Tuesday to Ash Wednesday, even if Tuesday's party is out in the cold and Wednesday's service is in a warm church. Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday, is about fun and excitement. Ash Wednesday is about dust and ashes. People live for the moment at Mardi Gras. Repentance is the theme of Ash Wednesday and Lent.

When Lent begins, the fun comes to an end. It's the Garden of Eden all over again. Adam and Eve were in the midst of Mardi Gras until they sinned and got booted out of the Garden. That was the original Ash Wednesday service. They heard the words, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." But God put the dust on them in the shape of a cross, for He told them the good news about the coming Savior.

If it wasn't for that, no one would come to church during Lent. Who wants to go to a solemn service where repentance is the main focus? Where the topics are sin and death, darkness and gloom? The reason you come at all is because the dust is in the shape of the cross. God didn't send Adam and Eve out of the Garden without hope; their hope was in the Crucified One who would come. And He is your hope today. Repentance may be our theme, but God's theme is forgiveness—forgiveness for you; and where there is forgiveness there is hope.

But we begin with ashes. Our first parents didn't die physically when they took a bite of the fruit, but death was in their future. "You shall return to the ground," God told them. And so with us. Ash Wednesday is simply a look into our future. "You are dust," we are reminded, "And to dust you shall return." People spend large amounts of money trying to avoid thinking about death. We cover up our wrinkles. We color our hair. We don't enjoy talking about death. We prefer Mardi Gras to Ash Wednesday. But the grim reality is that we don't live in the Garden anymore. We live in a world full of death, and we ourselves will one day become dust and ashes.

In the Old Testament ashes were a sign of repentance. Saints like Job, Mordecai, and many others sat in ashes to show they were repentant. The sign of ashes is very fitting, for if we remember who we are—the dust of the ground—what right do we have to be our own god? How can the dust tell the Creator what He should do? We are but dust, and so why is it that we think the whole world revolves around us? We are only dust, and so why do we live as if only we mattered?

You and I are going to die. We will return to the ground from where we came. Before we become ashes again, we need to sit in the ashes with Job and Mordecai. We need to repent of our selfish living. We need to remember that God has driven us out of the Garden. It's not Mardi Gras anymore. It's Ash Wednesday. The time to repent of our sins is now before we return to the dust.

But if our theme is repentance, God's theme is forgiveness. He did not drive Adam and Eve out of the Garden in anger. He had already, in His heart, forgiven them because His Son would die on the cross for them. The black which drapes our altar today is pointing us to the black of Good Friday. God does not leave you sitting in ashes. He sends His Son to Calvary's dark hill for you. You and I were driven out of the Garden with Adam and Eve, but Jesus was driven out of the gates of Jerusalem to die your death. He dragged a heavy

cross through the dust of the ground to redeem you who are but dust. In your baptism the sign of His cross was made upon you so that you may always know that even though you are dust, your dust is forgiven in Jesus. All the sins you have done are cleansed by His blood shed for you.

Today is Ash Wednesday, but Easter is coming. Today we sit in ashes, but the light of Christ is dawning upon you. When your body one day is laid in a coffin, your pastor will again make the sign of the cross over you to remind your loved ones of who you truly are. Yes, you are dust; and yes, you are returning to the ground from where you came; but in Holy Baptism you belong to Jesus. Because of Easter your dust shall rise again in glory. You belong to Jesus. He gave you His life in your baptism. He gives you His life-blood here at His altar. You, therefore, are Christ's...and to Christ you shall return. He will not abandon you to the grave. Where the Head is, the body must follow. After death comes the resurrection. After the ashes comes eternal life with Christ.

You are not just dust...you are God's forgiven child. We are not in the Garden anymore, but that's okay. Heaven is coming. It comes to you who sit in ashes. It comes because of Jesus. Go in peace, friend. All is well. Mardi Gras may be over, but your life in Christ will never end. Amen.