

February 14, 2024
Ash Wednesday
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

The Last Word

As you might imagine, my Facebook feed is full of pastors and, wow, are my pastor friends having a good time with the: “Ash Wednesday is on Valentine’s Day this year” theme.

For the past few weeks there have been memes and jokes floating around in pastor Facebook world, things like “You can’t spell VaLENTine without Lent”.

Then there was a valentine that said,

“Roses are red,
ashes are gray.
We’re all going to die.
Happy Valentine’s Day.”

There was a meme that had someone asking a pastor, “What are your plans for Valentine’s Day?” The pastor replied, “I have to work and remind everyone of their inevitable deaths.”

This other meme was similar, but even more creepy. Someone asks a pastor, “What are your plans for Valentine’s Day?” The pastor replies, “I’m going to smear dirt on people’s faces and tell them that they’re going to die.” Honestly, when it’s put that way, it makes me think that we need to be on an episode of the now defunct *Criminal Minds*.

I’ll admit, the last time that Ash Wednesday fell on Valentine’s Day, back in 2018, I got into a similar spirit. I even picked up Valentine’s Day cards and Valentine’s Day décor and conversation hearts to use in my sermon which was, of course, about how much God loves us.

It was very tongue in cheek, entertaining, almost a cute sermon, if there can be such a thing, but it did have a point. But it lost a lot of its sparkle, when, between the afternoon service and the evening service, I learned about the school shooting at Marjory Stone Douglass High School in Parkland, Florida that left 14 students and 3 educators dead and 17 students and educators injured.

The news about that atrocity took all of the wind out of my sails about the “cuteness” of the juxtaposition of Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day, these holidays of love and death.

I felt the gut punch of Ash Wednesday on that day, six years ago, in a way that I never had before. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

Just as I was in 2018, this year as we have geared up for the Ash Wednesday, I have been reminded that people don’t need me, don’t need my crosses of ash, don’t need the words of liturgy to remember how tenuous our hold on life is. Just yesterday two people from two different families in our congregation shared with me that they had lost a parent. Yesterday, February 13th. And today is Ash Wednesday. Here we are. Remembering that we are dust, and to dust we shall return.

All of us who have ever lost a loved one, a parent, a grandparent, a child, a spouse, a sibling, an aunt, an uncle, a friend, a coworker, walk in the knowledge that Ash Wednesday is always very close to us, as we are forced by circumstances, in the world and in our lives, to remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

No matter what my Facebook pastor friends say, my primary job on this day, our primary job on this day, when we stand with our praises ground to ashes, with our Alleluias silenced, with our mourning so close at hand, is not to remind people of what we all already know so well, that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

Instead, our task today is to be reminded and to remind each other and others what God can do with dust.

In the very beginning, the living Lord of the Universe stepped out of eternity and formed a human being out of the dust of the ground and breathed life into the earth creature. God gave sustaining food and living water and the beauty of the garden and companionship and family to the living creature. God loved this creation and walked with the dust being in the cool of the evening.

Centuries later, when human beings had betrayed their companionship with God, when they had broken their covenant with God more times than anyone could count, when over and over again, they had chosen death rather than life, when they had turned away from the God who loved them, a prophet named Ezekiel stood looking at a valley of dry bones. Perhaps in that moment he too was remembering that he, that we, are dust and to dust we shall return. Then he was asked a question, “Mortal, can these bones live?”

Ezekiel didn’t know, but God showed him. The bones rattled. They came together, bone to bone, and they were covered with sinew and skin. Then God breathed on them. God gave them the breath of life, and dust, death, became life.

Hundreds of years after that Jesus of Nazareth stood in front of the sealed-up tomb of his friend, Lazarus, and ordered that the stone be rolled away. But Lazarus’s grieving sister Martha protested because she knew what would have already started happening. Lazarus had been dead for four days. She knew that the process would have already started, the process of Lazarus turning back into dust. She knew that no one wanted to see or smell what lay behind that stone, what lay inside that tomb. She knew that Lazarus was dust and to dust he was returning.

But into Martha’s certainty that death was final. Into Martha’s grief Jesus spoke words of hope, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?”

And then Jesus prayed to God his Father and spoke words of life in the face of death, “Lazarus, come out!”

The dead man came out, brought up from his grave, alive again. The breath of Jesus, the words of Jesus, the Son of God, brought life out of death.

God can bring life out of death. God can breathe life into dust. That is what we are here to remember.

If all we were here to do was to have it retold to us, that we are dust and to dust we shall return, we wouldn't need to be here at all. Because we already know that, in our broken, worried, and wounded hearts. We already know how fragile life is and how we human beings have so little trouble trampling on the lives of others, on others who we have decided are the undeserving, the unworthy, the stranger, the enemy.

If death were all we were here to remember we could just turn on the news or take a look at social media or talk to our friends.

But instead, tonight, we have come together, not to be reminded of death, but to be reminded of the love that God has for us; yes, even for us, who have marked ourselves out for death, over, and over, and over again, turning away from the path of life that God has invited us to, turning to a way of death.

We will say as much in our words of confession tonight,

We confess before God and to one another
and before the whole company of heaven,
that we have sinned by our fault,
by our own fault,
by our own most grievous fault,
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done and by what we have left undone.

We know that we have sinned, that we are entangled in webs of sin.

And we know that the wages of sin are death.

But in our brokenness that is greater than the sum of its parts, we find God, not condemning us, but loving us and breathing our dusty and broken hearts and bodies back to life.

So, here we stand, in this in-between time, when it looks like sin has won, when it looks like death has won. When it would be all too easy to believe that death is the only story, the only true story.

We don't see the graves of our beloved emptied. We stand, like Martha and Mary, weeping, wondering why Jesus hasn't shown up when we expected, when we needed him too. We stand wondering if death really is the last word.

The ashes of death that will be spread on our foreheads tonight will be placed there in the shape of a cross, in the world's eyes, another symbol of death, but instead reminding us that, though death tries to claim the victory over us, Jesus Christ, who, for our sakes, became a creature of dust himself, died on the cross and rose from the dead, so that we could have eternal life.

All of those funny Facebook memes and messages that tell us that today is about death, that tell us that the ashes on our foreheads or on our hearts are about death are wrong.

Instead, the ashes are about life. They are about what God can do with dust and death. They are about how, when we think that all that's left for us is suffering, is grief, is death, God speaks life.

Today is about love; about how much God loves the creatures of dust and air that God created, about how God stands with us, weeps with us, walks with us, forgives us, feeds us, frees us, remakes us, over and over again, and saves us.

We start this Lenten season in the dust and ashes, and we find God here with us, walking with us where his love will take us, all the way to the cross, to the dust of death, but then, to the empty tomb. And the last word is life. Amen.