

*“You are dust, and to dust you will return.”* I have trouble with that statement. I mean, I know it's true. It's in God's Word. It's spoken by God himself to Adam and Eve after their fall into sin. It must be true.

And I really don't have a problem with the second half. Anyone who has seen a rotting corpse – even if it's just in a photograph or movie – knows that it's true. When we die, we decompose. Leave a body decomposing long enough and it turns into dirt. Into dust. That's an observable fact. It may not be very pleasant to think about, but it's true.

No, it's the first part that I struggle with. That most people struggle with, I think. *“You are dust.”* Really? Are you sure?

Because I don't feel like dust. There's nothing dusty about me. Dust doesn't think. Dust doesn't see and smell and taste and touch. Dust doesn't write literature or sing songs. It doesn't laugh at jokes or cry at a funeral. I am dust and yet I'm so much more than dust... aren't I?

Today is Ash Wednesday. And we are each told during the Imposition of Ashes that we are dust. You are dust. I am dust. And the ashes on our foreheads are to symbolize that fact. There is nothing dustier than ash, I think.

Like the dust of a decomposed corpse at the bottom of a grave, ashes are what remain when something living has been destroyed. Broken down to its most basic components. Totally and completely dead.

So dead, that it really doesn't have much use anymore. Oh, sure, there are a handful of useful things you can do with ash. It can be used as an ingredient in concrete. It can be used to make soap. It can be added as a soil amendment if the pH or calcium content is too low. But, like the dust of death, ash doesn't do much. Because ash is dead. And so ash is a symbol of death.

But, I'm not dead. So why am I dust? Why am I ash? I will be one day, but I'm not yet. So why do I need this morbid reminder?

Job gives us a clue in our Old Testament lesson this evening. This lesson is not a common one. It doesn't occur anywhere in our normal lectionary. And it probably needs a little bit of context.

As most of you know, Job suffered. He suffered more than just about anyone in all of human history. His herds and flocks were taken away. His home destroyed. His children killed in a windstorm. His body covered in agonizing sores. Everything he knew and loved was taken away. Every source of comfort and pleasure destroyed.

All he had left were his wife and friends. And, as it turned out, that only made it worse. Because his wife and friends were terrible and gave him terrible advice. His wife told him he should just curse God and die. Just give up on God's love. He doesn't care about you. He's not going to help you. Stop praying and abandon him because he's abandoned you.

His friends weren't any better. They were convinced that Job had brought this suffering upon himself. That he had sinned in some awful way and God was inflicting all this suffering upon him as punishment. Can you imagine going to your friends for an ounce of comfort in the midst of your suffering and they reply, “Yeah, Job, I don't know what you did to make God so angry, but you probably deserve it.”

And so we end up with this lesson. Where Job laments that, on the one hand, he has these terrible companions pushing him toward destruction and calamity. And on the other hand he has God humbling him for reasons he can't understand. Terrors are turned upon him. His prosperity has passed away like a cloud. His very soul is poured out of him and pain gnaws away at his bones.

Until he gets to the very end and says, *“God has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes.”* And in those words, he makes an interesting point.

When God takes everything away from us. The blessings of wealth and family. The comfort of friends. Our body and our health. When we feel like the love of God itself has vanished. What's left? What are we without God's provision? What are we when God ceases to sustain us?

We are dust. We are ash. Nothing more. In the beginning, God formed Adam from the dust of the earth and he breathed into him the breath of life. And the man became a living being. Without that breath of life, what are we? Dust. Ash. Nothing more.

When God cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden, he didn't just cast them out of a physical location. He cast them out of a spiritual location as well. He cast them out of his own presence. He cast them out of his sustaining, life-giving Spirit. He had warned them that in the very day that they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they would surely die.

And so they did. They became empty shells. Living dust. Dust that was waiting to die. Apart from God's breath of life, that's all we are. That's all we will ever be. You are dust. And to dust you will return.

And we really, really don't like hearing that. We don't like thinking about it. We don't want to admit it's true. Because dust doesn't do much. Dust doesn't do anything. Dust is dead. Ash is dead. It's what's leftover after everything good and alive is taken from it. And we don't like seeing ourselves like that. Even though that's exactly how God sees us.

Which is why, like Job in the Old Testament, like Tyre and Sidon in our Gospel lesson, we repent in sackcloth and ashes. We put ash on our foreheads and we hear those words we hate, but which we know are true: You are dust and to dust you will return.

We put these ashes on, but then we look at each other. And we don't just see ourselves covered in the ash that we all truly are. We see ash in the shape of a cross. And it reminds us of another truth.

The truth that *"for our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* The truth that Christ was the one man since Adam who still had that breath of life within him. He was the one man since Adam who truly was more than dust and ash. In him was life.

And he gave up that life so that we might live. He gave up his life that we might be new creations. So that we might hope for a future that is more than dust. More than ash. More than death.

A future with life and life abundantly. Life eternally. After the fall, God cast us out of his presence and we died spiritually, for the sustainer of our lives was no longer with us. But in Christ God dwells with his creation once again. He dwells with us in the body and blood of His Son. Body and blood nailed to the cross. Body and blood given from this altar.

*"Behold, now is the favorable time; behold now is the day of salvation."* For you are not cast out of God's presence any more. He is here with you this evening. His sustaining, life-giving Spirit is with you this evening. You are not an empty shell. You are a new creation.

The old has passed away. It died on the cross. Our sin was burned into ash. And all that remains is a symbol of it on our foreheads, reminding us that it is gone.

In its place, the new has come. And it comes by water and the Word. Washing away the ash and marking us not as dust, but as children of God. Therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. The flesh is sin. The flesh is dead. The flesh is dust and to dust it will return. No, instead we regard everybody according to Christ. To the life he has he has given us.

We are not like Job. Abandoned by God. Cast into the mire to become dust and ashes. Job had everything taken away and he felt like nothing as a result. We have everything given to us. The life of Christ. The righteousness of God. The treasures of heaven. The glory of paradise.

You are dust and to dust you will return. But that's not a bad thing. For from that dust you have already been raised from the dead. And from that dust you will again be raised from the dead on the last day. You are dust and to dust you will return. But you are also alive and to life you will return as well. Amen.