

## **From Ashes to Ashes, and Dust to Dust**

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Ash Wednesday is the beginning of our Lenten journey, a journey intended to prepare us for the truth – the truth about God, the truth about our world, and the truth about ourselves. Easter will open our eyes to the truth about God with the light of a new dawn proclaiming the victory of life over death, and the triumph of God’s love over anything that would pretend to end it. Some might think that the beginning of such an ambitious journey deserves all the hoopla of a fiery pep rally, encouraging the troops to begin with confidence in who we are and where we’re heading. But instead, we begin in the darkness of a Wednesday night, with a somber look at the reality of the lives we lead and the truth about who we are. We begin with an extended prayer of confession, identifying the many ways in which we have let God down, let our neighbors down, let creation down, and let ourselves down. We are sinners, creatures whose flesh and blood brings with it the curse of mortality, symbolized with the ashes that mark our foreheads. *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust*: death awaits us, with all sorts of daily reminders of its power to bend our lives to its will.

In this regard, I have run into no better quote to describe our plight than the words of lawyer-turned-theologian, the late William Stringfellow, in his commentary on the book of *James*, reflecting on the connection between the temptations we battle every day and the lord these ordinary temptations serve. We face all sorts of crises in life that hold the possibility of our undoing. “Loneliness, lust, illness, both success and failure, age, accident, conflict, scandal: each of these only foreshadows death, and all of them are consummated in death.” (*Count It All Joy*, 1967, page 51) In this sense, our struggle with death is not only the final crisis we must someday face, but it is also an immediate crisis of existence, precisely because these crises serve the immediate aim of our undoing and find their ultimate end in death. Drawing upon Stringfellow, in word and spirit, I would like to continue with insights that are both profound and probing. “Death, both biblically and empirically, dominates the moral landscape of our world and our lives. It is greater than any other reality to which we attach significance and value, leaving God aside.” Death outlasts all of our many idols – money, fame, fortune, and monuments to the rich, famous and powerful. Death is the obvious end, aim, and meaning of existence, if God is to be ignored, surviving as death does every other thing that we love and to which we attach significance or meaning. “Death is so great, so aggressive, so pervasive, and so militant a power that the only fitting way to speak of death is similar to the way one speaks of God. Death is the living power and presence in this world that feigns to be God.” (*Count It All Joy*, page 52)

*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust*: these are the images we use with our worship this evening. They tell us the truth about the world we live in and about us. Ash Wednesday proclaims this hard truth, and many at Zion have heard and listened. I have been spending a lot of my time editing what will become our *Lenten Devotional Guide* for 2009, forty meditations shared by members in our church family, which form a powerful testimony to the fact that we get it. For example, you don’t need to open Steve Dague’s eyes to the reality of our mortality. In

one unfortunate moment, almost everything changed, and the fragility of our human body became starkly clear. But God has opened up his heart and his mind to an even more powerful reality, the reality of God's faithfulness, the power of God's love, and the promise of God's life, which is more powerful than all the claims of death. You can read about Steve's reflections right inside the cover on the page designated *Thursday, February 26*.

Nick and Juanita Cignetti also share a story that tells of their brush with death's servants. It occurred when their son Chuck, just a young boy at the time, wondered about some lumps on his shoulder, which turned out to be the beginning of a full-blown case of Hodgkin's disease, which had reached stage 4A, and brought on ten months of adult strength treatment at the Cleveland Clinic, with nine of those months registering absolutely no improvement, until a vision and a promise was sealed by a rainbow. Chuck's cancer then went into remission ... for the past thirty-five years! Sure, it's a miracle; but more than that, it's coming face-to-face with the reality of our mortality, and then discovering the truth of faith, that however powerful death may be, and it is, it is not the last word. It is not what it feigns to be, our final destination and ultimate end in life. No. Our God is a God of the living, not the God who bows down before death. Ashes mark our foreheads. Death will make its claim. But these ashes are in the form of the Cross. We know who we are, creatures whose flesh and blood destined us to die. But we also know whose we are, claimed by a risen Savior, whose resurrection destines us to life eternal in the reign of God's kingdom.

It isn't just the miracles at the extremes that call to mind the contrast and continuity between who we are as creatures of flesh and blood, and whose we are as children of our Heavenly Father. Every day brings opportunities to lament the limitations of our lives as ordinary sinners living within the constraints formed by flesh and blood. For some, it is worrying about a child, or our children, or for others whom we love and cannot shield from the dangers that lurk in the shadows drawing us to the darkness and to death. This past month has been one of chronic worry for Connie Riffle, who thanks God for her daily miracles of Rick's survival in the face of what should have been a life-ending accident at the Timken Company. But, while each day brings prayers of thanks, these are accompanied by constant worry as the struggle for survival continues in the face of untold dangers and a myriad of worrisome developments, any of which could lead to all sorts of worrisome outcomes. Happy endings are temporary, because death ultimately outlasts our happy endings this side of eternity. Ask Steve Dague about the on-going reality of difficult days and arduous struggle, even with the happy ending that he, Darla, and the boys celebrate each and every day. We are grateful, to be sure, but the truths proclaimed with Ash Wednesday are crucial for a right understanding of the battle we're in, the help God provides, and the love that is ours, both in Christ and through the company we enjoy in the communion of the saints, this family of faith, this group of friends that are ours at Zion Lutheran Church.

We end as we began, with the sign of the ashes in the form of the cross proclaiming the truth about who we are and whose we are, which is the comfort of the Gospel assuring us that our Lord offers comfort for the journey, and triumph in the end, with Easter proclaiming the victory of God's unending love over anything and everything that would pretend to end it. That victory is ours ... in Jesus' name. Amen