

“Remember That You Are Dust...”
A sermon for Ash Wednesday, 2026
Faith Lutheran Church
Dr. Bob Stelter, preacher

Let us pray: Dear Lord, our culture teaches us to think highly of ourselves, perhaps more highly that we ought to think. We acknowledge today that in the great cosmic context of things, we are but a little dust that you have sprinkled here for a time. Remind us in this holy season that we are not Lord of all. You are. And for that we are thankful. Amen.

From the Bible, the 3rd chapter of the Book of Genesis: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Genesis 3:19, four pages from the very beginning of the Bible, just the 75th verse of the entire Bible.

In Genesis Chapter 1, God creates a wonderful world. In Genesis chapter 2, God creates our parents Adam and Eve. In Genesis chapter 3, The Fall, rebellion against God. And in Genesis 3:19, God tells Adam the result of his sin: “You will return to the ground from which you were taken. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Dust, the origin of Adam’s body when God made him but a chapter earlier, dust now becomes a symbol of Adam’s eventual death.

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return” are the words spoken to you when you received the ashes, smudged in the shape of a cross, on your forehead . We smudgers did not mean to insult you as you came forward, but it is our responsibility on such a somber day as this to remind you of the unfinished nature of your natural self. To drudge up God’s curse.

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Sobering words. They are such sobering words that we would rather dismiss them than truly take them seriously. Being called dust lacks a certain elegance. It is demeaning.

Why do we not like being called dust? We’ve been called much worse in our lives. Yet, being reminded that we are dust leaves us feeling like we wish we were more. Much more.

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Being told that we are dust is so difficult to hear that we only do it once a year, here at the beginning of Lent. What Lent is exactly is hard to define. It entails something different for each of us: Perhaps some discipline, fasting, prayer, acts of service, additional time in worship and Bible reading.

Whatever your Lenten discipline, Lent begins as we receive the ashes with those sobering words: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” This is truly one of those moments when actions speak louder than words. Without the ashes, it would not be the same.

Putting on ashes is an ancient practice. In the Bible, putting on ashes was either an act of penitence or an act of grief. We might think that penitence and grief are two very different things.

In the Bible, penitence with ashes was something you did when you did something wrong. When you wanted to acknowledge your guilt or ask for forgiveness. Think of the prophet Joel.

Grief with ashes was something you did when you suffered a great loss, the death of a loved one or a leader or one’s home and livelihood. Think of Job.

But don’t you think that penitence, true repentance, is actually very much related to grief? It may even be a special kind of grief. Authentic penitence is what happens when we are moved to grief for having lost someone or some thing through our actions...or inactions. The grief of penitence is what comes from realizing the damage our wrongdoings have done, at some point realizing the damage that our

words and deeds have done to those around us. True penitence is being sad that we have hurt someone else. Not just guilty, convicted or ashamed, but truly sad.

The ashes of Lent are a sign of that type of sadness and grief. We grieve for the loss and hurt caused by our sin. And not just our personal sins. That's too narrow a focus for a time such as this, a time so profound as Lent. Lent calls us to grieve for the loss and hurt caused by the sin of the whole world. The sin of which we are unavoidably a part.

Lent doesn't allow wiggle room. Lent forces us to examine not just our personal sins, but also the sins of our nation, the sins of our race, the sins of our socioeconomic class, the sins of our gender, the sins of our religion, indeed the sins of the human race.

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Lent is the one season in the church year when we are invited to do this kind of unflinching, no-excuses allowed, self-examination. Again, not to make us feel guilty or ashamed. But rather that we might grieve for the brokenness of our human condition. That's what the ashes are about. At their best, these ashes remind us of our connectedness to all that is, all that God has created.

And the words that accompany the ashes, "Remember that you are dust

and to dust you shall return,” these words are not a put-down, but a simple statement of fact. We are dust. Our lives here are impermanent. Our ability to effect change is limited. Dust.

What do you do when you encounter dust at home? (I take off my glasses...) No, when we see dust, we start cleaning. We do it, like it or not. Life is like that. We’d just as soon overlook the dust, but we cannot.

And Lent is the time when we turn our attention to the dust that has settled from the sin in our lives. The Bible calls us to see truthfully. We each need a good spring housecleaning.

One more thought about the words, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” When those words were spoken to you tonight, they were accompanied with the drawing of a dust cross. We called you dust and we applied dust, but we didn’t just wipe a dusty mark, we carefully drew a cross when we did it.

That cross is a reminder of your baptism, when the cross mark was made in water on your forehead. That cross is a crude sign of God’s great promise. At your baptism, at that very same spot on your face, the pastor did the same thing, made a cross with his fingers and said to you, “You have been

marked with the cross of Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit forever.”

Our dusty smudge of a cross on Ash Wednesday is a reminder that God knows we are dust. God knows we are not and cannot be perfect. Today’s dusty cross reminds us that through Jesus we have forgiveness of sins. And not just the personal little grocery list of all the naughty things we did wrong this week kind of sins, but of the corporate, collective, universal sin that is part of who we are and how our society works.

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The Ash Wednesday dusty, smudgy cross reminds us of our forgiveness and then calls us past the sin, past the shame, past the blame to what lies beyond: forgiveness; reconciliation with God; the promise of new creation; newness of life. And it is a new life where we roll up our sleeves and work for the restoration of peace, the call to justice and the well-being of creation. We are called to the work of undoing the damage our human sinfulness has done.

This day we feel the grit of the ashes pressed on our foreheads. Maybe for a brief moment our hearts are opened enough to feel the shame of Adam and maybe even to feel the grief our Creator

feels. Few of us can be this honest with just anyone. We can only be this honest with God. The God of forgiveness made known to us in Jesus Christ. The God who calls us beloved daughters and sons. The God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

The great and glorious news of this somber day, Ash Wednesday, is that we can be. We can be that honest. We can grieve the damage we do and the damage done to us. We can be made whole again. And we can be part of God's restorative work of making all things new.

We are dust and to dust we shall return. And we are the living, breathing children of God.

Amen.