

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: Wednesday, February 14/2024, Year B, Ash Wednesday

Text: Lectionary readings: Isaiah 58:1-12, Psalm 51, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Title: Remember What?

Focus: As our foreheads are marked with the sign of the cross with ashes, we are told, “Remember that you are dust.” What shall we remember? What’s the significance of this instruction or of dust? The dust of Ash Wednesday reminds us of the limits of our life on earth and the gifts of time and opportunity. The sign of the cross reminds us that we belong to God, who calls us beloved.

**Remember “. . . remember that you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”** (Genesis 3:19b)

Tracing the Mark of the Cross on Ash Wednesday: What Shall We Remember?

1. “Remember that you are dust.”

As we enter the season of Lent tonight, I will invite you forward for me to trace the mark of the cross on your forehead which was made at baptism. The spoken words, repeated to each worshiper, are **“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”**

What does that mean—this reminder about dust or the mark with ashes?

- Ashes were used in Biblical times as a physical sign of grief, mourning and remorse.

Here’s an example: You may have been in worship on January 21 when we talked about the prophet Jonah. Jonah was the reluctant prophet who did not want to respond to God’s call to go to the people of Nineveh. Remember that to get to Nineveh, he would have had to go north and east across land and instead he went west and got in a boat to try to flee from God. When he finally did go to Nineveh and proclaimed his one sentence message, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (Jonah 3:5), the people changed their behavior. **“Everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth” (3:5). The king covered himself with sackcloth and *sat in ashes*”** (Jonah 3:6).

We talked about sackcloth that day—which would be like wearing a burlap sack—itchy and uncomfortable. In Jonah and other places in scripture, “sackcloth and ashes” go together as a sign of one’s remorse or repentance or humility.

They have that symbolic connotation here on Ash Wednesday, as well as being **a sign of finitude—of the limits of one's life.**

- Ashes are a reminder that God created Adam out of the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7) and that, like Adam, we will return to the earth. We will die. The second creation story in Genesis describes how God formed Adam out of the dust of the earth and breathed life into him.

By a quirk of the calendar, Ash Wednesday happens to fall on Valentine's Day. I wonder if that seems like the biggest bummer or downer: You might think something like, "On the day that we are supposed to celebrate love and especially romantic love, we are thinking and talking about death?! What a bummer!"

The gifts of time and opportunity come from remembering that we are dust or that we will die.

I can see how a person would think that Ash Wednesday falling on Valentine's Day is a bummer. I can see how people avoid thinking about the end of life at all. The cultural norm is to not acknowledge the reality of the end of life or talk about death.

But here's how I see recognizing the reality of death as a gift: Thinking about death or knowing that life will come to an end in death helps you to live life more fully.

- **Thinking about death helps you to recognize that time is a gift.**

"Remembering that you are dust" or recognizing that life is finite renews our recognition that time itself is a precious gift or renews our sense of gratitude. When we recognize that time is a gift, we orient ourselves in such a way that we don't waste it. So, when you are reminded of the reality of death, you are prompted to ask yourself, "How do I want to live today?"

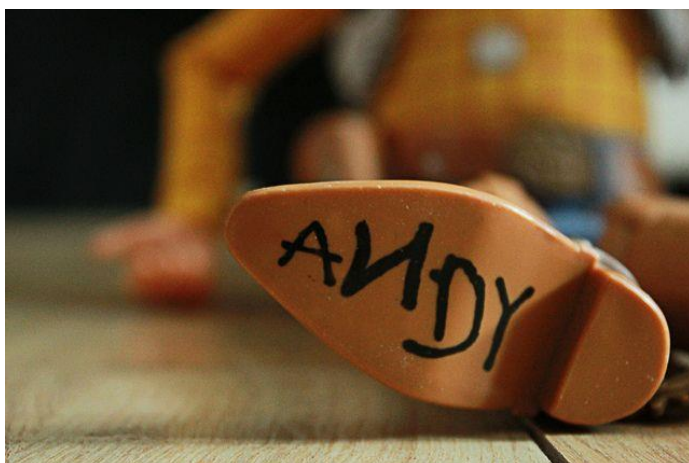
Suppose you live with a life-limiting condition (or live with someone else who does), you know that there are good days and bad days. That's the kind of circumstance in which your orientation to all of life would be affected/changed. Because you know not to waste a good day. Time is a gift. Life is a gift. Relationships are a gift.

Or it could be your family or you might be friends with a family who has faced a decision to arrange for a beloved family member to receive hospice care. It's a difficult decision when that's your circumstance, and yet hospice care can be a gift, too. It can be a painful time, but also a sacred time.

Hospice care or the nearness of the end of life can be a reminder "that you are dust and to dust you shall return." It can be a reminder that time with family is precious. Hug your loved ones a little tighter today. Tell them you love them. Don't waste the opportunity.

2. We Shall Remember that We Belong to God

Do you recognize this picture?



It's the cowboy boot of Woody from Toy Story. Woody is the character voiced by Tom Hanks. He is Andy's closest friend and confidant. Andy writes his name on the bottom of Woody's boot. It's a sign that Woody belongs to Andy. That belonging gives Woody a sense of identity and purpose. The relationship between Andy and Woody is one of the most endearing qualities of the first Toy Story movie. As Andy grows up, that relationship with Woody continues to be a primary thread across the whole series of movies.

In worship on January 7, we read of the baptism of Jesus and talked about remembering our own baptisms. At the close of the sermon, I invited you to come to the font and I marked you with the sign of the cross and told you

- **You are a beloved child of God. You belong to God.**

What shall we remember today? As we hear those words, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" we are also marked with the sign of the cross.

Being marked with the sign of the cross is like Andy writing his name on Woody's boot. It is a reminder that you belong to God and are beloved by God.

We shall remember that we belong to God. We are God's beloved.

What Shall We Remember?

1. Remember that you are dust. . . That life on earth will come to an end, but that we need not fear that, but we give thanks to God for the gift of each day.
2. Remember that, in life and in death, you are God's beloved and that you belong to God. "You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."¹ It is like God writing God's name on us.

¹ Words from the baptismal order. See *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, (2006), p. 231. See *Presbyterian Book of Common Worship*, (2018), p. 412.