

Sermon For Ash Wednesday, March 1, 2017 - "Beautiful Dust"

Ash Wednesday 2017
March 1, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beautiful Dust

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Tonight, we will be marked by ashes and told, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

Often around Ash Wednesday, I reflect on an experience I had with dust and ashes. I found new meaning in it again this year as I thought back.

I was at one of my favorite places in the world, my family cabin; but this time it wasn't for vacation. This time I was frantically digging in the dirt for my father's ashes before the cabin was sold.

Both my parents were cremated and we buried their ashes at their cabin. Some years after their deaths our whole extended family couldn't afford to keep the cabin, so we had to put it up for sale.

My aunt went up there one weekend to dig up my parents' ashes so we could move them to a new burial site. She found my mom's ashes but couldn't find my dad's. I was troubled by the thought of leaving his ashes behind. So, when we went up there to pack up before the sale, I decided I needed to go search again.

It soon became obvious that this was no simple task.

- I realized the wooden box the ashes had been in had probably deteriorated.
- The rock we'd used for a burial marker had been moved in my aunt's earlier searches and now there was just a huge hole.
- The ashes could be anywhere around or below that big hole - I had no idea where to begin.

But I was feeling desperate so I just attacked that dirt. Within minutes I was drenched with sweat, covered in dirt and surrounded by mosquitos; but I was determined not to rest until I found those ashes. I dug for over an hour. All the sadness I felt about selling the cabin, all the anger and regret, all the grief about my parents' deaths - all of that was being channeled into my frantic searching and I was getting nowhere.

When have you found yourself stuck, digging yourself into an ever bigger hole, unable to stop? When have you been consumed by anger and regret? When have you desperately tried to fix a situation through your own effort? All of that was going on for me there in the dust.

Slowly, I began to realize that my frantic activity, desperation and frustration were getting me nowhere. Slowly, I realized I needed to pray, forgive my aunt and let go of all the anger and anxiety I was pouring into the search. So, I prayed, I took some deep breaths, I let go.

As I prayed, I began to experience deep peace. I realized I could search a little longer without all the angst. And then, amazingly, within a few moments I found the ashes.

But I believe that whether I'd found the ashes or not, God gave me what I needed there in the dust. As I look back, I see that God met me there and changed me.

God in Jesus has entered into all the dust, the dirt, the struggle and sorrow of our lives and now meets us there, meets us here. Jesus meets us in the dust and reminds us who we are.

We are dust, we are utterly dependent upon God. Left to our own devices we will find ourselves stuck in sin and shame. All our striving, all our frantic activity will only lead us into deeper holes.

We are dust, **and**...God makes beautiful things out of dust.

In the beginning, God formed us all from dust of the earth and breathed into us the breath of life.

Still now, God continually gives us breath. In each moment, a breath is given without us having to earn it or do anything, without us even having to remember to breathe. And when we take our last breath, God gathers us up and raises us to new life eternally. God makes beautiful things out of dust. God also breathes the Holy Spirit into us, a new and right Spirit, as we prayed in Psalm 51 today. The word for spirit in Greek and Hebrew is the same as the word for breath. God's spirit is as close to us as our breath and available to us in every moment.

Often, instead of breathing deeply of God's Spirit, we inhale the toxic fumes of anger, anxiety, despair, pride, shame. We get filled up with things that leave us depleted and gasping for air.

God seeks always to cleanse us from all of this and to breathe into us the Holy Spirit. God does this for us personally and as a community all the time, but Lent allows us to intentionally seek that cleansing and renewing through practices of confession, fasting, prayer and giving.

The Lenten practices are not meant to get us more focused on ourselves, how we're doing, how we look. They're intended to open us to the life-giving Spirit of God which is as close to us as our very breath. They're intended to draw us more fully into God's work of breathing new life into the whole world - the work of loosening the bonds of injustice, letting the oppressed go free and breaking every yoke.

In Lent, God works to renew us from the inside out and turns us toward the rest of this God-breathed, God-loved world. We are set free from a focus on self so that we might serve others - an insight Martin Luther lifted up from scripture that we will hear about throughout our Lenten journey.

In Lent, God works to make us who are dust a blessing to the world. Remember that you are dust. Remember, God makes beautiful things out of dust.

Let's take a moment now to pray. Our prayer time will continue into the introduction to the Hymn of the Day.

Thanks be to God.

