

## ***“Ashes and Cross”***

In the name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We begin a new season, the Season of Lent, and the change is dramatic. With the Imposition of Ashes, we hear those stark words first spoken to our father Adam – “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Gen. 3:19) Sin has brought death and destruction to God’s “very good” creation – and into our lives.

The world joins with our enemy the devil – the very ground yielding thorns and thistles for our toilsome labor all the days of our lives. Even our flesh joins the battle – fighting against everything that God has created us to be. And we hear the verdict – “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

In this season our Alleluias have been put to sleep. We are left in the dust and ashes of sin and death – without the sound of the angelic choir. Like Adam and Eve we have been cast out of paradise – forced to sit in the sackcloth and ashes of a fallen creation.

Tonight, all is dark and bare. We sit in the darkness of our sin, and our impending death. It’s as if a wall has been placed around Mount Zion, and the majesty of God is hidden so that we cannot see it – not yet, not until Easter.

But it is good for us to be here, in these 40 days of Lent. We need a break from our busy lives so that we can recognize our own sin – to see the emptiness of our lives apart from repentance and faith in Christ.

We need this extended time with our Lord in the wilderness of temptation – so that we might learn that WE do not “live by bread alone” (by the sweat of our brow and the work of our hands) – but we live “by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

Our daily lives are consumed by material things and external appearances – and so it’s no wonder THAT becomes our focus in this time of reflection and repentance.

But it is NOT an external “fasting and weeping and mourning” that avails before God – but rather – the true sacrifice of “a broken spirit, and broken and contrite heart” that the Lord will not despise. (Ps. 51:17)

We sit in the sackcloth and ashes of repentance – NOT to be seen by men – but so that we might see our true selves. “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them,” Jesus warns – “for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.” (Matt. 6:1).

But, oh how difficult that is for us! Our sinful flesh likes attention – like recognition from others – likes the *oohs* and *aahs* of impressed onlookers. We like to think that even God is impressed with our works of righteousness. But God’s favor does not come that way – by our meager works, by our fasting – not even by OUR repentance.

It is only because of Jesus – as we sing in the Gradual throughout Lent. Jesus, “the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame.” It is always, and only, because – “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor. 5:21)

Our heavenly Father desires that sinners would be reconciled to Him – and this is only because of Christ, and His cross. Only in Christ can we “fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” Only in Christ will the Lord spare us and take pity on His people (Joel 2:17-18). Only in Christ is the time of God’s favor, the day of salvation. (2 Cor. 6:2)

Dearly beloved, the ashes and cross teach us to number our days – to recognize our sin and weaknesses – to see that our life is fleeting – that the angel of death is always at our door --- and to confess that there is nothing we can do ON OUR OWN to create, or preserve, our life.

The ashes and cross cause us to take seriously that which we try to avoid in the daily news – the suffering and death that surrounds us (constant reminders of the wages of sin). The creation is fallen. That which God created “very good” is corrupt – including each and every one of us – and we are hopeless to fix it.

Only Christ is our hope, and the Season of Lent helps us to see that more clearly. For Christ is the great Redeemer and Restorer of this fallen creation – having reconciled all things by His Incarnation and His Cross.

As St. Paul writes (Rom. 8:19-24): “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we await eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we are saved.”

And so we pray: “Almighty and everlasting God, because You hate nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent, create in us new and contrite hearts that we, worthily repenting of our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain from You, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness.”

In Christ your prayer is answered. In Him, the dust and ashes of the fallen creation, including YOU – are resurrected to new life. In Christ, you are RECREATED – once again God’s beloved, and “very good” child – all for the sake of Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.