



SERMONS THAT WORK

Ash Wednesday

Redeemed Dust

**[RCL] Joel 2:1-2,12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 103 or 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10;
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21**

Ash Wednesday has its choice hymnody, for sure. There are songs that congregations expect to sing every year. There are also popular songs, however, that fit the theme. One such tune flows down the decades to us from the year 1973. It goes like this:

*“Every time that I look in the mirror
All these lines on my face getting clearer
The past is gone...”*

Ash Wednesday reminds us all that we are mortal. It’s a day for everyone, when we are all reminded that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. If we are lucky enough to grow old, we do see the lines on our faces as signs that mortality is creeping closer. We have also all known people in the prime of their lives who died way too early. Most of us know children who passed, far too early.

We are all, however, on a march toward an end. Whether we like it or not, Ash Wednesday is here to confront us with this uncomfortable reality. The song continues: The past is gone...

*“It went by like dusk to dawn.
Isn't that the way?
Everybody's got their dues in life to pay.”*

Many of us believe, explicitly or implicitly, that we are paying those dues by attending here, especially today. “Blow the trumpet in Zion,” the prophet Joel practically yells at each congregation following the lectionary. “Sanctify a fast.”

We believe that we can somehow push off mortality or at least make ourselves feel better by attending church, by paying our dues to the Creator. *Is that* why we are here? Back to the song:

*“Half my life's in books' written pages,
Live and learn from fools and from sages.
You know it's true,
All the things come back to you...”*

Today we hear the words of Jesus, telling us not to look dismal when we fast, and not to boast of our fasting — as we prepare to do just that: mark our heads with ash. This may well be Jesus’ reminder to us that we are all, in a way, kind of hypocrites. That none of us is beyond self-reflection. Are the ashes a show? And if not, why? What are they for, *really*? The chorus of our song for today:

*“Sing with me, sing for the year,
Sing for the laughter, and sing for the tear
Sing it with me, if it’s just for today,
Maybe tomorrow, the good Lord will take you away.”*

As you may have already figured out, the song is “Dream On,” by Aerosmith. The steel guitars in the intro are unmistakable. Though it is not sacred music by the strictest definition, it is perfect for Ash Wednesday, capturing our mortality and the futility of trying to be “good enough,” to pay our dues, to appear righteous or immortal or beyond self-reflection. All of those things are impossible. None of those things is why we are here today.

We are here because we are dust, but we are beloved dust, redeemed by God. We are here to begin the journey of Lent, to tell the story of Jesus crucified and risen, not *so that* God will love us, but *because* God already does. We are God’s beloved dust.

Despite everything going on in the world, the liturgy rolls on too, as it has for two thousand years. The church has told the story of Jesus through war, famine, and plague, not to distract or entertain itself, not to pay its dues, but because it sheds light on human life in every age.

When you see suffering and death, whether on the news or in your own life, you may feel powerless. You may feel powerless as you watch people you love suffer. You may feel powerless in your own suffering, whatever that looks like for you personally. Human life leaves us all feeling powerless at some point.

The world is full of self-help, and it is full of talk of ways that we can all single-handedly change the world. We are told, directly and indirectly, that we are bad people if we can’t solve every problem we encounter. We feel personally responsible for far too much, far too often.

Today, we acknowledge that we are dust. We are powerless to help ourselves or others. On Ash Wednesday, we are called to humility. We cannot save ourselves because we are not saviors.

But Ash Wednesday does not leave us without hope.

In the midst of it, we are still encouraged to dream on, because we are redeemed. Not because we paid our dues. Not because of who we are or what we have done. But because of who God is.

We are dust: God's beloved dust. God creates humanity — all of us — out of the dust of the earth.

And so therefore, let us, as dust, tell the story of Lent and Holy Week and Easter again, for it is the story of our redemption. It is the story of how God saved the world, even as it exists right now, in this moment.

We are mortal. We are not saviors. There is only one savior, and it is his story that we shall tell as these weeks unfold. And so:

*“Sing with me, sing for the year,
Sing for the laughter, and sing for the tear
Sing it with me, if it's just for today,
Maybe tomorrow, the good Lord will take you away.”*

Together, let us “dream on, dream on, dream on, dream on, dream until the dream comes true.”

Let us dream, together, again, until God makes the dream come true. Thanks be to God, the only savior, keeper of promises, lover of dust. Amen.

The Rev. Anna Tew is a Lutheran pastor based in South Hadley, Massachusetts. She has served a fantastic little parish called Our Savior's Lutheran Church for seven years. Anna was born and raised in Alabama and considers Atlanta her second home. She graduated from the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in 2011 and has served in a variety of settings since then, including both parish ministry and hospital chaplaincy. In her spare time, she enjoys hiking, CrossFit, and music of all kinds.