

Episcopal Church Or the Resurrection
“God’s Forgiving Love” (Psalm 103:13-14)
Ash Wednesday: March 2, 2022
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“Ring around the rosy, pocket full of posies, ashes, ashes, we all fall down!”—you learned this nursery rhyme as a child. Some claim it goes back to the plagues of the middle of the last millennium, but either way, even as a child you learned that eventually “ashes, ashes, we all fall down.” Every year on Ash Wednesday we are reminded that we are mortal, reminded during the imposition of ashes of what God said to Adam and Eve after the Fall in the Garden of Eden, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (*The Book of Common Prayer* 265; Genesis 3:19).

No matter how smart, or beautiful, or witty, or industrious, or strong, or gifted, or invincible, or wealthy you may be, you are still mortal. Your days on this planet are numbered—and even if it’s a high number, it is still a finite one—even if it’s many years from now (which I hope it is), the final day of your earthly life will indeed come. Every year on Ash Wednesday ashes are imposed on foreheads of people from all walks of life and in all stages of life—from elementary school kids trying not to crack up during the service, to idealistic young adults with “their whole lives in front of them”, to single people who wish they were married to married people wish they were single, to the middle aged who are doing their best to simultaneously care for their aging parents and their teenaged kids, to the elderly asking, “Where did all the years go?”

No matter who you are, you have an appointment with death. It may be on a rainy spring Monday morning, or a hot summer Wednesday night—on a crisp fall Friday evening, or early on a bitterly cold winter Saturday morning. There is no way you can escape your appointment with death. You may be able to postpone it, even for many years, but that day will still arrive eventually. Scripture tells us, “It is appointed for mortals to die once” (Hebrews 9:27). While you do not know when your appointment with death is, God knows when that day will be and who will be at your side and what the weather will be—God knows all of it.

I am going to juxtapose two illustrations, one from Shakespeare and one from a classic progressive rock band. In one his latter plays, the often-overlooked *Cymbeline*, Shakespeare wrote the following funeral dirge:

Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages,
Thou thy worldly task hast done
Home art gone, and taken thy wages.
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust...
The scepter, learning, physic, must
All follow this and come to dust...
All lovers young, all lovers must
Consign to thee and come to dust (IV.ii.259ff).
All of us, as Shakespeare repeatedly observes, "come to dust...come to dust...come to dust."

When I was a kid the progressive rock band Kansas had their biggest hit with a gorgeous ballad about our mortality. Guitarist Kerry Livgren had developed a guitar finger picking exercise that his wife Vicci heard and recommended he add lyrics to, and it evolved into a song you probably know:

I close my eyes, only for a moment and the moment's gone
All my dreams pass before my eyes, a curiosity
Dust in the wind, all they are is dust in the wind
Same old song, just a drop of water in an endless sea
All we do crumbles to the ground though we refuse to see
Dust in the wind, all we are is dust in the wind
Now don't hang on, nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky
It slips away, and all your money won't another minute buy
Dust in the wind, all we are is dust in the wind...

Everything is dust in the wind (from their 1977 album *Point of No Return*)

Both Shakespeare and Kansas would have appreciated Ash Wednesday—
"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

All of us shall “come to dust...come to dust...come to dust”, and “all your money won’t another minute buy.”

So where is the gospel on Ash Wednesday?

In Psalm 103 which we read every year on Ash Wednesday, we are reminded of God’s love and compassion for mortals like us— “As a father cares for his children, so does the Lord care for those who fear him. For he himself knows whereof we are made; he remembers that we are but dust” (Psalm 103:13-14, *BCP* 734).

Not only does God remember you are but dust, when God became incarnate in Jesus Christ God took that dust upon himself, became that dust himself in order to reconcile us who are formed of the dust to God—as Paul wrote in today’s passage to the Corinthians, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Jesus knew exactly when his appointment with death was: Good Friday, when on the cross Jesus both atoned for your sins and fulfilled the law in your place.

Scripture is clear that the same God who remembers that you are dust chooses not to remember your sins (Hebrews 8:12). Near the end of Shakespeare’s play *Cymbeline* which is rife with sin—treachery, deceit, corruption, murder—King Cymbeline proclaims, “Pardon’s the word to all” (V.v.422)—and Cymbeline’s word is God’s word to you: “Pardon’s the word to all.” The last word from God who remembers that you are dust is a word of forgiveness.

Several weeks from now during Holy Week we will read Psalm 22, the psalm Jesus quoted on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1). This psalm also points to Jesus’ burial, “You have laid me in the dust of the grave” (Psalm 22:15)—which happened on the evening of Good Friday.

But as we will celebrate at the end of Lent, Jesus did not remain “in the dust of the grave,” which means neither will you. Yes, “remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return”, but also remember that you will be raised up from the dust; for God’s forgiving love is stronger than death and lasts forever—even longer than the earth and sky—and God’s forgiving love guarantees that you are and will be much more than dust in the wind.

Amen.