

ASH WEDNESDAY
Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust
Wednesday, February 25, 2009
Pastor Mark Nieting

Genesis 3 and Psalm 51

Have you ever had second thoughts about something about TWO seconds too late? Or maybe your judgment was a tad impaired for, say, a “wee bit too long?”

- You THOUGHT the car would make the turn into the garage....
- You were SURE nobody else was coming when you backed up.....
- You just KNEW nobody was listening when you said what you did.....
- You were POSITIVE the teacher wasn't watching when you looked at the answers on the paper next to you....
- You THOUGHT getting that tattoo was a fantastic idea!
- You were 100% certain nobody would ever find out.....

So we do what we do.... and end up in a world of hurt that can cost us:

- Money
- Friendships
- Time
- Reputation
- Health
- A job

And when we really make a mess of it... Our faith and even our life!

Can you imagine how Adam felt a few days God “expelled” him from the Garden of Eden? Think about what must have gone through Adam’s head as he and Eve looked back at the Garden of Eden from the OUTSIDE and knew they would never get back inside!!!! A few days ago they living in absolute paradise, where his only job had been to give names to the animals (how long could THAT have taken!) and taken long, afternoon walks with Eve and God.

Then came that one defining moment, wrestling with whether or not to believe GOD when He said, “Let that fruit alone” or whether or not to believe the sneaky serpent who tried to reassure him that God was only protecting His turf....and let’s face it, trying to keep Eve happy.....so let’s have just a bite....

Poof! It all changed, literally, in a heartbeat.....or, you might say, in a bite!

Out of the Garden they went, bouncing on the dust and sand and hearing God’s Words echoing in their ears: *I MADE YOU OUT OF DUST AND YOU’RE GOING TO GO BACK TO DUST!*

It was even worse than that. It wasn’t just dust. Now there were thistles and thorns to contend with.....as well as rocks that had to be dug up and moved as Adam had to raise food to feed his family. Life went, literally in a heartbeat, from sweetness to sweaty.

It makes me wonder if Adam, rolling one of those big heavy rocks out of the way of where he was going to plant part of his garden, actually thought the rocks were laughing at him!

“What have you done?”

“You had it MADE and you blew it!”

“Why did you listen to the voice of that serpent?”

“FOOL!!!!”

In a moment we’re going to come forward to the altar and before receiving the Lord’s Supper, we are going to receive the Mark of the Ash on our foreheads. Remember the words that accompany this rite?

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Despite the fact that it’s an opening to share our faith with others, I don’t think any of us LIKE to walk around with the sign of the ash....and listening to Jesus’ words from the Gospel lesson we read just a moment ago, words warning us about being hypocrites.....it’s probably a good thing that we don’t. After all, how many of us NEED reminders that we are as good as dust, destined for the dirt of the ground!

I mess my life up frequently enough and well enough to remember on my own failures and my own sins, Lord.....without you reminding me over and over!

And yet, here I am before you with the Mark of the Ash on my forehead, and it's not there to remind you. Like God's Law, which serves as a mirror to show me my sin, that's what the Mark of the Ash does for me. It's the Mark of Cain, a Mark of Separation, reminding me that I am nothing without a Savior.

Yet is my remembering enough to make me change? To make me repent?

- DO I?
- Did Adam? He walked with God every evening and look what happened!
- Did Moses? All those miracles and he still doubted God's promises.
- Did King David? Once glance at Bathsheba and he was down for the count!
- Did Peter? He spent 3 non-stop years with Jesus, sticking his foot in his mouth on a regular basis and denying he even knew Jesus!
- Did Paul? He had a vision of Jesus' glory and called himself "chief of sinners!"
- Did you?

Ashes to ashes and dust to dust....

You can almost hear the stones yelling out to Adam, to Moses, to David, to Peter, to Paul, to me and to you..... we're going to GRIND you into dust and ashes because you won't listen to God!

Let me make a guess....when you get home (some of you will even do it when you get into the car)... you'll look in the mirror to see what the ashes look like on your forehead. You'll wash them off and look in the mirror again to see if they're gone.

And you wouldn't be happy if you had to have them reapplied tomorrow, and the day after and the day after that!

Lent is the season where we really have the opportunity to peel back the masks we usually wear ... ESPECIALLY to church. It's an opportunity to look at ourselves in

the mirror of God and take an inventory of just who we are and how we look: to ourselves, to others, and to God.

It's not easy to do. In fact, it's very, very difficult.... Mostly because WE know what's there. It's stuff we don't want our friends and family to see. It's stuff we don't want the pastor to see. And it's stuff... be honest... we don't want God to see.

In the Old Testament sinners could be stoned....and what stories some of these rocks might tell.

But when Jesus came, remember HIS words about stones?

Let him who is without sin throw the first stone.

Those were HIS words..... and they weren't his ONLY words. They were words meant to stop us from participating in one of human-kind's favorite sports: judging others.

The MOST important words Jesus spoke can be counted on one hand, and they were meant to remove us from the judgment of God Himself: you know the words..... "IT IS FINISHED!"

Yes, the ashes will remind us of our sin..... but as God's people living in the covenantal relationship with Him by virtue of our baptism....they no longer ACCUSE US.....of our sins. Jesus Dealt With Them.

Jesus Christ is the final Word in our lives.

Jesus, the Word made flesh, who lived among us, who kept God's law perfectly. Jesus, who climbed the ROCK of Golgotha and hung on the cross so that He could become for us the **Rock of our Salvation**.

Jesus, who sacrificed Himself as the Lamb of God for the sins of the world.

Take the rock you received as part of worship. Allow it to be a reminder that Jesus is the Solid Foundation of Faith and the Rock of our Salvation.