

Sermon Title: "Ash Wednesday"

Prelude

UMH #378 "Amazing Grace"

Apostle's Creed UMH #881

Scripture

Matthew 4:1-11

Ecclesiastes 3:14-22

Matthew 7:13-14

Sermon: "Ash Wednesday"

Lord's Prayer

Imposition of the Ashes: UMH #353

Closing Prayer and Benediction: Number 6:24-26

Postlude

Monthly Challenge: Your challenge this month is to read through the Gospel of Matthew

"Ash Wednesday"

Pastor Jacob Hanson

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### **Opening Prayer**

"From dust you came, and to dust you shall return." In a few minutes you will hear those words if you choose to have the ashes imposed upon your foreheads. Today marks the beginning of Lent, and unlike the Advent season that is a joyfully expectant time (akin to a pregnant mother waiting to give birth), Lent is a much more somber time akin to a person coming to fully recognize that death will come... although there is certainly a hidden joy therein. The words "From dust you came, and to dust you shall return" loosely comes from Ecclesiastes 3:20, where the writer explains just that. Indeed, Beloved, there is truth in that statement. We all are moving from the cradle to the grave, and just as Adam was made from dust and yet died and returned to it, so too will we. But of course there is more to the story than just the reality of death that we talk about today and throughout Lent, because it isn't just the ashes that are placed upon us, but also the mark of the cross and understanding that it is Christ our Savior who gives us hope beyond the grave.

Lent is forty days long, from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday, and it is roughly forty days long as a call back to the time Christ spends in the wilderness fasting and being tempted. (This year it is forty-six days long in all... Wednesdays to Sundays are not always 40 exactly of course.) Appropriately we read about the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted. We have to understand that while Jesus is fully God, He is also fully man. It means that just like you and me, He is flesh and blood and has the ability to be tempted, although He did not sin. This can be summed up for us in Matthew 4:2 where it stated "And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry."

After fasting for forty days, Jesus was hungry Beloved. It was at that point that Satan came to tempt Him via Jesus's human nature. "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." Satan appeals to what Jesus's flesh longs for. This doesn't work, and Jesus fights Satan's temptation with scripture, stating "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." Satan then tries a different approach, taking Jesus to the top of the temple in Jerusalem, saying "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command His angels concerning You'; and 'On their hands they will bear You up, so that You will not strike Your foot against a stone.'" This time Satan tempted Jesus's human pride, to prove that He is great. Satan even throws in a twist, literally, by twisting scripture from Pslam 91 out of context. Jesus again fights Satan's temptation with scripture by quoting Deuteronomy 4:7 "On the other hand, it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Jesus fights misused scripture with scripture in context. (We should remember that!) Finally, the devil takes Jesus who is hungry and physically weak and already taxed to the max in His human self, and tempts Him with ultimate power. He says "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me." After showing Jesus the best the world had to offer. Jesus for the third time combats Satan's temptations with scripture and sound doctrine by quoting Deuteronomy 6:13 and 10:20, saying "Go, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.'" After this Jesus is ministered to by angels, and from there He begins His ministry, all the things we talk about in regards to Jesus other than His birth.

What does all this have to do with you, Ash Wednesday, and Lent in general? First and foremost, the temptation of Jesus is something that we can very much understand, although we are guilty of sinning while He did not. We have given in to our temptations of our fleshly lusts, we have given in to our temptations to put the Lord to the test (to prove ourselves in an unholy fashion, perhaps even misquoting God's word to excuse our illicit behavior), and we have given in to our temptations to sacrifice what is right for what we desire. Beloved, as we well know, sin leads to death. We are mortal, we die in our sins, and spend eternity in hell... unless we are saved. This is where the rubber meets the road in Lent. We somberly remember for these forty days between today and Easter that we need a Savior. We remember that without Christ our only outcome in life is to return to the dust, as Ecclesiastes reminds us. The good and the bad who perish, the young and the old who die, the poor and the rich who meet their end, all are destined for the same place because all die in their sins... unless Christ saves them.

As we begin our Lenten journey today, contemplating all that Christ has done for us as we eagerly await His resurrection, it is good for us to remember our mortality. We also remember, as Matthew 7:13-14 states, to “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who go through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” If you are redeemed by Christ, Beloved, then you are a part of the very few who have been saved. Not by your own actions have you been redeemed, but through His blood and His perfect life and His resurrection.

In a moment we will do the imposition of the ashes, and you will hear the words “From dust you came, and to dust you shall return.” As we do this be reminded of your mortality, remember your frailty, and know that you are a sinner of no hope on your own. However, also remember that you have a champion in Jesus Christ who is no mere mortal, who lived the life you could not, and has saved us from our sins by His blood. Ash Wednesday is a time of somberness as we embark into Lent... but it is also a day of hidden joy. Let us pray Beloved.

#### **Closing Prayer**