

March 1, 2020 – Romans 5:12-19 & Matthew 4:1-11

*“You are dust, and to dust you will return.”* As many of you may know and may have even heard this past week, these words form the theme for Ash Wednesday. The day we take ashes, the dust of the earth, an ancient Biblical symbol for both death and repentance, and it is placed upon our foreheads in the shape of a cross. And we hear those words from Genesis 3: *“You are dust, and to dust you will return.”*

It might feel a bit redundant, then, to hear those same words yet again in our Old Testament lesson for today, just a few days later. And I suppose it is. And that's a good thing.

Because this isn't just a theme for Ash Wednesday. It's a theme for Lent. Our entire Lenten season is one of remembering that we are dust and to dust we will return. We are dust because from it we were created. We are dust because we return to it. We are dust because of our sin.

And yet, were we created from dust? I don't know about you, but I was created from my parents. It was their DNA that combined to create me. Adam was created from dust, but not me... right?

And, honestly, that curse that God pronounced was given only to Adam, wasn't it? He didn't say that this curse was for all of humanity. He said it was for Adam.

*“Because you [Adam] have listened to the voice of your wife... [because you Adam] have eaten of the tree... in pain you [Adam] shall eat [of the earth]... thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you [Adam]... for you [Adam] are dust, and to dust you [Adam] shall return.”*

This is Adam's sin. This is Adam's curse. Why am I getting roped into this? This isn't our fault. This isn't our punishment. So why are we all getting lumped together on Ash Wednesday and told, *“You are dust, and to dust you will return.”*

Well, for that, we turn to St Paul, to Romans 5. One of the most important pieces of theology in all of scripture. And also one of the most difficult.

Now, I could break this down for you and make it something you would understand just fine. But why should I when it's already been done for me? There's a hymn that does a phenomenal job of explaining Romans 5. And, not coincidentally, we'll sing it in just a few minutes at the start of Holy Communion.

It's called “All Mankind Fell in Adam's Fall.” It was written by a man named Lazarus Spengler who was a close friend and colleague of Martin Luther's and a powerful voice in the Lutheran Reformation. So powerful, in fact, that when Luther was excommunicated by the Pope in 1521, Spengler was also excommunicated on the same document. And it was actually Lazarus Spengler who designed the Luther Rose off of Luther's instructions.

In addition to being a theologian and an artist, Spengler was also a hymn writer. And the hymn “All Mankind Fell in Adam's Fall” would prove to be so well-received and respected by his fellow reformers that it is twice quoted in the Formula of Concord. It's a great hymn.

It's found on page 562 of your hymnals. And, if you want to, you can open up to it right now. Because I want to show you how this hymn explains Genesis 3 and Romans 5. And maybe you'll get more out of this sermon than a simple explanation of scripture. Maybe you'll get something you can actually sing on your way home from church.

So verse one goes: *“All mankind fell in Adam's fall; One common sin infects us all. From one to all the curse descends, And over all God's wrath impends.”*

The title and opening line really addresses that point I brought up a few moments ago. Adam didn't just fall in Adam's fall. All mankind fell in Adam's fall. Genesis 3 isn't just about one man's sin. It's about all of us.

Why? Well because sin is very much like a disease. An infection. It's not a handicap that stays confined to one person. It spreads. And it is highly infectious. With the whole coronavirus scare, we're all very aware of how easily a virus can be passed from one person to another. Well, sin is possibly the most infectious disease of all.

It didn't take a cough or a sneeze or even a breath for the devil to infect Eve. All it took was four words: "Did God really say..." It didn't take even that much for Eve to infect Adam. All he had to do was watch his wife eat the fruit and he took it from her.

Is it really so surprising then that it would pass on to their children? That just one generation later, a human had murdered another human. That just a few generations after that, God was ready to flood the entire earth to wipe out our sinfulness. Sin is like a disease. And it infects us all.

But we can't take that analogy too far. Because when we think about someone dying from an infection, we would normally classify that a natural cause of death. But there is nothing natural about sin or death. Neither one was given to us by God as part of his perfect creation. Neither one was meant to be a part of our lives.

Death is a curse. It's a punishment. It is God's wrath upon us. Every death is an execution. And every day of our lives is lived under a death sentence. It is a direct result of our sin. We are dust because God made us from the dust. We return to dust because God unmakes us.

The hymn continues in verses 2 and 3: *"Through all our pow'rs corruption creeps And us in dreadful bondage keeps; In guilt we draw our infant breath And reap its fruits of woe and death. From hearts depraved, to evil prone, Flow thoughts and deeds of sin alone; God's image lost, the darkened soul Seeks not nor finds its heavenly goal."*

Through all our powers corruption creeps. We can't fight sin because the very powers we would use to fight it are corrupted by it. The moment we are born – in fact the moment we are conceived – sin is there. We draw even our infant breath in guilt. And our lives are spent reaping the fruit of that sin.

From out of our heart flows evil. From out of our thoughts and deeds flows sin. We live in a darkened world and we live with darkened hearts.

We were created with God's image. With an understanding of what he wanted and an ability to do it. We looked like our Father in what we thought and said and did. Our hearts looked like God's heart.

But because of sin, that image is lost. God doesn't recognize himself in us and we don't recognize God. We don't seek him. We don't find him. We are strangers from heaven.

It's all a pretty bleak image. But the hymn gives us hope in verses 4 and 5: *"But Christ, the second Adam, came To bear our sin and woe and shame, To be our life, our light, our way, Our only hope, our only stay. As by one man all mankind fell And, born in sin, was doomed to hell, So by one Man, who took our place, We all were justified by grace."*

Adam didn't just fall into sin. All mankind fell in Adam's fall. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. All were doomed to hell.

But Christ came to be a second Adam. A perfect man, born without sin. Who faced temptation in the desert, who faced the four words that ensnared Eve, "Did God really say...", who faced the infection of sin. And came out of it unharmed. Uninfected. Holy and righteous.

Now, he could have come out of the devil's temptations, looked at mankind and said, "See? I did it! You should have too!" And condemned us all.

But he didn't. Because he came to bear our sin and woe and shame. He came to be our life and our light and our way. He came to be our only hope, our only stay.

He came to justify us by grace. Think about that phrase for a second. What justice is there in grace? Grace is by its very nature unjust. And yet, that's exactly what Christ does. And he does it by substituting his own life for ours. By standing in our place, in our punishment, and taking the death we deserved.

Remember how I said that death is a curse? It is God's wrath upon us for our sin? Well, Christ had no sin. He bore no curse. He had no reason to receive God's wrath. But he still died. Because he took our death. He took our curse. He took our punishment on the cross.

*"We thank You, Christ; new life is ours, New light, new hope, new strength, new pow'rs. This grace our ev'ry way attend Until we reach our journey's end."*

We have a new life in Jesus Christ. Because we have a new Adam as our father. The curse of sin and death no longer reigns over us. His death has substituted for our death. His life substitutes for our life.

And with that life comes light in the darkness of this world. Hope in the despair of death. The power to resist temptation and to do good even when the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh try to convince us to do otherwise.

And most of all, with this new life comes grace. Grace to justify even when we sin. Grace to attend us throughout these days. Knowing that though there is still a grave awaiting us at the end of this life's journey, there is also an empty grave waiting for us by the power the raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Amen.