

Ash Wednesday 2019  
St. Brendan's Anglican Church  
Rev. Doug Floyd  
Joel 2:1-2; 12-17, Psalm 103, 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

In a few moments, each of us will be marked with the words, "Remember that you came from dust, and to dust you shall return." Think of dust particles floating in the air and soon to be blown away. We begin Lent with the solemn recognition that all our earthly glory is but a momentary flicker in light of eternity.

The Scripture says that we are made of the very stuff of the earth, the mud of the field, the clay beneath our feet. And yet, the Lord our Creator has breathed upon this adama, this red clay. His Breath, His Spirit animates us, sustain us, transforms us from mere dust to persons who can be loved, who love, and who can bear His glory.

Scripture tells the story of the man and woman made of the mud of the earth, turning away from the Lord Creator. In their turning away from the Lord Creator, they face the horror of life outside of God's grace, an undoing, a grief that still shakes the ground. We call this turning away sin. St. Athanasius spoke of sin as the undoing of all things.

We have been born into a world turned away from God. We have a tendency to trust the creation over our Creator. We have a tendency to trust in ourselves over the Lord of Glory. We have a tendency to turn away. Nothing in this creation can animate us, sustain us, or give us true and lasting glory. Outside of God's grace, all things can only lead us in the way down to nothingness, in the way of all dust.

Our gospel reading reminds us that this turning away from God can happen even in the midst of supposed acts of righteousness: in giving to the needy, in prayer, and even in fasting. All these acts can be done as a way of seeking to turn the eyes of others from the glory of God to our own glory. All of these apparent acts though they appear righteous can still be a movement away from the Lord Creator who loves and sustains and glorifies us.

Even as Scripture reveals humans turning away from the Lord, it reveals another story of the Lord continually turning toward His creatures. God rescues His people who are enslaved in Egypt. This picture becomes a picture for all future generations of God rescuing His people enslaved by sin and death. We also see the gift of God's "No!"

When the children of Israel are led out of Egypt and to Mt. Sinai, they actually hear the voice of God thundering down from the mountain. They hear the 10 No's.

No other god  
No bowing down before graven images.  
No bearing the name falsely.  
No work on the Sabbath.  
No dishonoring parents.  
No murder.  
No adultery.  
No stealing.

No false witness.  
No coveting.

One way to understand these no's is to consider the "No" that a parent speaks to her child. No can mean: quit hitting your sister! It is used to stop repeated behaviors. No can also mean. Danger. As when a child is running toward the street. No! A child is about to touch a hot stove. No! Then again it can be form of counsel to protect the growing youth from decisions that could be harmful. Can I quit school and watch cartoons all day? No!

The parental No is a reminder that the parent cares for the child and wants the very best. We need that reminder ourselves. God's No is a gift that says, "He is the Lord Creator and we are his creation." He has created each of us and actually knows us better than we know ourselves. His purposes are good and just and trustworthy even when we are too blind to see.

Through the prophet Nathan, God tells David "No" to the act of taking Bathsheba and having Uriah killed. This Divine No prompts the great prayer of repentance in Psalm 51 that we will read in a few moments. Later, David wants to build a Temple for the Lord. His desire is right, but God says No. David is the creature and God is the creator. The Lord has another purpose. In His No to David, he gives a different Yes. You cannot build the Temple, but I am going to establish your name in a different way. I will establish your House as the true and lasting Royal House of Israel.

No is a reminder that we are dependent on Him our Lord and Creator and his ways are not our ways.

Many years later when the Jews are held captive in Babylon, they wanted to return home. They wanted to see God come and rescue them like he did in Egypt. He answers them with a "No" through his prophet Jeremiah. He tells them to settle down and seek the welfare of the city where he sent them. (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

Though the captives in Babylon were disappointed not to go home, the Lord gave them one of the great promises that we still recite to this day,

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." Jeremiah 29:11

His "No" to their hopes was a "Yes" to His better, more gracious plan for them and the world.

While we usually do not have a prophet deliver the word No, we experience plans that fail. Conviction for wrong thoughts and behaviors. Dreams that die. Companies that lay off people. Expectations that come to nothing. Even as we face our own sinfulness, we face pain and struggles that are sometimes related to our own poor decisions and other times seem to be thrust upon us. We are learning trust in the Lord who created us, sustains us, and will lead us to glory.

During Lent, we rehearse the Good News that God has not abandoned us in a life independent of His grace, in a life enslaved by desire that will lead to our corruption and despair.

The Lord Creator has come among us, has entered our state of sin, has taken the grief at the heart of all creation on himself. In Jesus Christ, we behold the very God who redeems and sustains and glorifies us. Jesus comes to our rescue as we sink in sin, as we struggle bound by the sin that so easily entangles and leads us away from glory and back to nothingness. In His life, death, and resurrection, he leads back to the heart of the Lord Our Creator, back to the Father of all.

Today we are marked for journey. With the dust of death as a reminder on our foreheads, we turn afresh to the Lord who breathes upon our dustiness and brings life out of death. Today we begin a journey to the heart of our faith, to our baptism in Christ and his Church. The Lenten season is set aside by the church to remember our hope in Christ alone. The disciplines of fasting, almsgiving and prayer, are not for meant for our glory or even as a means of grace. In these disciplines, we practice the habit of turning to the Lord with our words, our bodies, and even our money. We are asking him to lead us in the way of repentance. To bring us back to the heart of our faith. To submit to both His No and His Yes in our lives. Whether we are facing endings or beginnings in our lives, let us lift up our voices in thanksgiving and praise to Him alone.

We remember afresh that in Him to live and move and have our being.