

*He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap... (Psalm 113:7)*

Ashes are filthy. If you've ever had to work around them, you know exactly how filthy they are. Fireplaces, fire pits, or even places that have been struck by disastrous blazes can leave your hands black with soot and ash.

As frustrating as this is, perhaps it's a useful picture. Ashes remind us of our mortality. Unlike the angels, we are physical beings, created with bodies made from the dust of the ground. Our status as righteous beings created in God's image was sullied completely, however, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God's Word and were subsequently cursed by God. What was true for them also is true for all of us: *By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return* (Genesis 3:19).

Since ashes remind us of our mortality – we die because of sin – one custom that has persisted in many churches is to receive the imposition of ashes on our foreheads on what has become known as Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent. For millennia, ashes have been used as a sign of repentance in connection with their symbolism of mortality and death. For example, when the king of Nineveh heard the prophesy of Jonah – that Nineveh would be overthrown in 40 days because of their sin – he gave a proclamation to all people and animals that they should dress in sackcloth and sit in ashes. God saw their repentance and himself relented of the disaster which he had spoken through Jonah! While we don't sit in ashes or wear sackcloth, we certainly heed the same warnings of God that we repent of our sins. We usually hear from the prophet Joel on Ash Wednesday: *"Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster* (Joel 2:12–13). Repentance – literally 'turning' away from sin and back to God – is what the season of Lent is all about.

Yet, it's not our repentance that we focus on during Lent. The ashen crosses on our foreheads are not meant to be shown off as signs of how good we are at repenting, or some silly thing like that. The ashes are formed in a cross to remind us that our faith clings always to the cross of Christ, who himself died that we might have life. Jesus really died, and even more was really raised from the dead. And since he has overcome sin and death, whoever believes in him, *though he die, yet shall he live* (John 11:25). What a comforting promise!

As we make our way, then, through our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration at Immanuel, February has been chosen to highlight our cemetery. It's the place where many of the saints in Christ who have been members of Immanuel are buried. It is, of course, a place of somber sadness. Even more, though, the cemetery is the place where we go to be reminded that death doesn't have the final word. Jesus has overcome death! And one day we will, with all saints in Christ, sing our mocking song at death: *O death, where is your victory? O death where is your sting?* (1 Corinthians 15:55). Indeed, there will come the day *when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live* (John 5:25). Thanks be to God!

-Pastor Squire

"Lord, let at last Thine angels come, to Abram's bosom bear me home, that I may die unfearing; and in its narrow chamber keep my body safe in peaceful sleep until Thy reappearing. And then from death awaken me, that these mine eyes with joy may see, O Son of God, Thy glorious face, my Savior and my fount of grace. Lord Jesus Christ, my prayer attend, my prayer attend, and I will praise Thee without end."

("All Who Believe and Are Baptized," *LSB 601*, v. 1)