

SERMON – ASH WEDNESDAY – 2008

I greet you this Ash Wednesday with grace and peace and mercy from God our Father and from our Lord and from our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Intro.

I've brought with me to church today a few objects I have on the shelves or on my desk of my office; a Green Bay Packers cheese head, a Vikings helmet, a ships model, a teddy bear, a red convertible, a teacher's apple pencil holder and a human skull.



Each of these objects hold significance for me, they all represent and remind me of something in my life. But, it's the skull that I want to draw your attention to today, Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. I've had the privilege of touring the home of Martin and Katie Luther in Wittenberg, Germany. On Luther's desk in his study is a real human skull, mine is fake. Luther had a human skull in his study we are told as a reminder of the brevity of this earthly life, the reality that each of us through death will become skeleton as Genesis 3 tells us and as we confess at graveside committal services:

'Dust and ash you are and to dust and ash you shall return'.

Today, Ash Wednesday, we begin the perennial season of Lent, a 40 day pilgrimage or journey from the skull and ashes of death to the Easter celebration of our bodily resurrection because 'Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Lent is a season of 'spring cleaning' so to speak, cleaning away the dust and ash. When I grew up 'spring cleaning' was a big event. Literally furniture would be moved out of the house to be scrubbed in the spring sunshine, clothes from the closets, rugs, blankets, curtains were aired out on the clotheslines, walls and ceilings and woodwork were washed and polished or painted. All of this done, due to the fine soot or ash from the oil and wood burners in the house over winter. Even the outhouse and shower house were whitewashed and limed to fumigate the built up winter smell when things began to thaw.

That's what the season of Lent is, a spiritual 'spring cleaning'. The word Lent in Old English is 'spring' or lengt (lengthen) of days. During Lent's 'spring cleaning', though we do this everyday of the year in confession and absolution, through Word and Sacraments, during Lent we take this special time to air out our souls, to clear out the clutter of sin in our hearts, to toss out the trash and be cleaned up 'squeaky clean' in the blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, Pure and Holy. Which is the theme of our Lenten Season this year, 2008. So let's begin that cleansing of Lent by apply God's Word to ourselves, going from the skeleton and dust and ash of death to the 'spring cleaning' of Easter Resurrection.

II. Today, Ash Wednesday, that Lamb of God, Jesus, comes very much into focus in the words of our Epistle reading: **1 Peter 1: "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect".**

Basically, a month ago we celebrated Christmas, the incarnation of God. God becoming one of us in flesh and blood 'conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary'. Jesus, true God is true man in every way, except one: Jesus, God/man is without sin. In every other way, Jesus is exactly like you and me including that He dealt with the same temptations to sin as we face every day. The difference is Jesus resisted those temptations as our substitute, vicariously. While all too often we cave into sin's temptations, we even willingly and sometimes eagerly embrace sin, we like to sin. Sinning is fun. Trying to get away with sin is an exciting challenge to our human nature. It should never surprise us when our conscience feels guilty, because we are guilty. We've polluted ourselves. We've fouled ourselves. Not just in what we do, but also in what we say and how we think, those secret sins. By nature simply being conceived and born a human being we've disqualified ourselves from God's holy presence and any contact or relationship with Him.

Yet that's what makes the message of Christmas and Lent and Easter so awesome. God Himself in Jesus Christ without sin came to substitute Himself for us sinners. Holy God stepped into the place of us polluted, fouled human beings. We have a God who is able to sympathize with us because as true man, God knows our temptations. **Hebrews 4: 14 – 16: "Therefore, since ... Jesus the Son of God, who has gone through the heavens ... is able to sympathize with our weaknesses has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need".**

Our consolation, however, isn't found simply in God's sympathy for us sinners. Our consolation is that God's sympathy for us moved Him to do something about our sin by His supreme sacrifice in our place through Jesus like a lamb slaughtered. God wasn't born as man simply to identify with our humanness, saying: "tisk, tisk, tisk that's too bad you're a sinner turning into a skeleton skull returning to dust and ash. I hope things turn out OK for you" Love God. Where is there saving good news in God's sympathy for us, sinners? But, God not only sympathizes with us, He substitutes Himself for us. Through Jesus Christ God came to do something about our dieing humanness, our skull making sin. Jesus, came to be our Savior, our Redeemer to remove and absolve and exchange our sin for His forgiveness, but also to give us His holiness before God. We stand before God as pure and holy as Jesus, the Lamb of God, is pure and holy. We stand before God without blemish or defect = Lenten Cleansed anticipating Easter Resurrection from skeleton skull to bodily resurrection and life. All because of Jesus! Now that is awesome good news that changes our lives forever!

III. And this heavenly status which God applies to us for Jesus sake when we die and our bodies are committed to the grave, this heavenly status applies to us right now, every day, on our life's pilgrimage.

"you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers" our lesson says.

Notice 'you were redeemed' it is an accomplished reality right now! On the surface, however, these words don't seem to apply to my life. My life is not empty. It is crammed with clutter, it is filled with activities = appointments, projects, people, all kinds of things. My calendar is full, my clock doesn't have enough hours, all kinds of things and people's expectations clamor for my attention. 'the empty way of life' doesn't appear to be mine, my life doesn't seem empty, it seems to be glut full.

But, there's the problem. To much of a good thing is not a good thing. Life in overdrive is not really living. Going faster and faster gets no one anywhere. A hectic, compulsive life is full all right = full of emptiness.

In Proverbs 14:12 God's Word says:

"There is a way that seems right to man, but in the end it leads to death"

That is the problem with life in this fallen world, in 2008, rush, rush, rush, do, do, do, achieve, achieve, achieve. And it leads to death. All that glitters is not gold. Things are not always what they seem. Sin masquerades itself in busyness. Our busyness that fills our lives can be exactly what Peter calls 'empty and worthless'.

IV. Listen again to God's Word to you this Ash Wednesday:

"You were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers"

You were redeemed! Maybe it's time to just simply let those awesome good words soak in. Maybe it's time to just slow down, sit back and simply let Jesus love you. Your eternal redemption is no do-it-yourself project to get done in your busy, busy, stressed out and brief life times. No pile of silver or gold, no amount of stocks and bonds, no accumulated net worth, no amount of real estate you own can free you from the emptiness of this fast paced, stressed out, over scheduled, hectic, compulsive, time driven, skeleton life of dust and ash.

Only the blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, Pure and Holy, can redeem you, can free you from the emptiness of this deadly world. There is a price tag on our stressed out over scheduled lives and that price tag is extremely high and it's represented for me by the skull on my office desk as it was for Martin Luther. And as sinful human beings we will all pay this price. Romans 6:23: **"The wages of sin is death"**

Our hectic, compulsive, busy lives will turn us into skulls, dust and ash. One day each of us after we have worked our selves into the grave will depart this earthly life and stand before the judgement seat of God. Hebrews 9:27:

"It is appointed for man to die once, and after that face his judgement"

We cannot, we dare not stand in that holy place offering the empty, futile, sinful life we inherited from our forefathers. But, on our judgement day before God we can offer the cleansing, Lenten, spring cleaning blood of Jesus, God incarnate, God in flesh and blood, our Savior and Substitute. We offer not what we have done, we simply offer what Jesus has done for us! For Jesus sake we stand before God right now and forever, redeemed, pure and holy, God's lambs, without blemish or defect.

And if that awesome good news does not cause you to take a breather and meditate for awhile in your busy lives. I don't know what will. Jesus took all the crammed in activities, the crowded calendars, jam packed hectic schedules, your compulsive living and He slowed it all down to His agonizing hours upon the cross in your place. And Jesus has erased from God's sight your busy, busy calendars filled with emptiness. And Jesus has made one appointment that you will keep, your judgment day before God. When you'll hear God's final verdict upon your busy, over scheduled, demanding, deadly earthly life, the same verdict Jesus announced from that cross in your place = forgiven!

Conclusion

Hearing that awesome good news slows a person up a whole lot. Moves us to some Lenten 'spring cleaning', decluttering, fumigating, tossing out the trash we've accumulated in our busy, busy lives.

Cleanse your souls and guilty conscience in Jesus!

Lay down your burdens in Jesus!

Put away your heartaches in Jesus!

Matthew 11: 28 Jesus invites you **'Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest!'** Take a breather as you simply meditate this Lenten Season upon Jesus, the Lamb of God, Pure and Holy. Who declares you to be a lamb of God, pure and holy for Jesus' sake. Thank you for taking time in your busy, busy lives and journeying with me these 40 days of Lent from Ash Wednesday's skull and dust and ash to Easter's resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, Christ has risen! He has risen indeed!. Amen

And now may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen