

REMEMBERING DUST

Sermon preached by K.C. Ptomey, Jr.

Scripture: Genesis 2:4b-3:19

Ash Wednesday

February 25, 2009

In a few moments you will walk down the aisle and the minister will place ashes on our forehead and say, "Remember that you are dust." The truth of the matter is that most of us would rather not remember that we are dust. It feels as if on Ash Wednesday we are summoned to wallow in our sin and unworthiness.

The phrase "Remember you are dust..." first appears in Genesis 3:19. The ancient storyteller has woven a wonderful tale. God creates a man and a woman and places them in a beautiful world. They are perfectly free to be who God has created them to be, with this exception - they are not to try to be like God. Who they are, just as God has created them, is good. But they are not satisfied with being themselves; they want to be more than human, larger than life. And this is where they get into trouble. And so:

To the woman God said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband; and he shall rule over you."

And to the man God said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field."

"By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken..."^[1]

It is just here in the story that the dust formula appears:

Remember you are dust

To remember that we are dust is to recall our disobedience, our sin, which is to say, our refusal to be who God created us to be.

In this context our memory of dust is incomplete, however, if we confine ourselves to Genesis 3:19. Other verses in Genesis also have something to say about dust:

(T)hen the Lord God formed human beings from the dust of the ground, and breathed into them the breath of life.^[2]

In this context to be reminded that we are made from the dust of the earth is to be invited to reflect on our creation. Dust becomes human when God forms it and breathes vitality into it. The point is that life is a gracious gift of God.

To remember that we are dust is to remember that we are dependent, creatures, relying on God for life. It does not necessarily mean that we are terrible, worthless, sinful. It is not a summons to guilt, but to the recognition that we live by the grace of god who created us.

^[1] Genesis 3:17-19, NRSV.

^[2] Genesis 2:7, NRSV.

Our dependence, our creatureliness, our vulnerability are not imposed upon us as punishment. This is the way God created us in the first place. It is what God intends for us.

On this Ash Wednesday let the dust formula serve not as a summons to guilt, but to a reaffirmation of our relationship with God. To remember that we are dust is to remember that God created us because God wanted us to exist. God does not despise the fact that we are dust; God rejoices in this dust which we are.

On Ash Wednesday it is well for us to remember that we are dust...

But we are not alone in our remembering. The psalmist claims that there is *Another*, who also remembers that we are dust.

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God will not always accuse, nor keep anger forever...

As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear God. For God knows how we were made; God remembers that we are dust.^[3]

God remembers. God remembers that we are dust. God remembers. Therefore, says the psalmist, "The Lord is gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love."^[4]

When God remembers that we are dust, God is not provoked to anger, but to compassion. A memory of dust evokes in God renewed fidelity toward the creatures who depend totally upon God's life-giving grace.

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Remember that we are mortal, dependent upon God. Remember that it is not a bad thing to be human. It is a good thing.

Remember that you are dust... But remember also that God remembers and has mercy.

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^[3] Psalm 103:8-14, NRSV.

^[4] Psalm 103:18