

Our Purpose: Introduction (Ash Wednesday)

Reading from Psalm 103:1- 17a,

"Bless the Lord O my soul and all that is within me,
bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, o my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits
who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you
with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagles'.

The Lord works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed.
He made known his ways to Moses, his acts
to the people of Israel.

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger
and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him;
As far as the east is from the west, so far
he removes our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.
For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust.

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As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it's no more.
But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting
to everlasting.”

Have you ever heard a song or a catchy jingle and then have the words or tune run through over and over through your mind and you can't get it out of your head? Some surveys have found that 90% of people have experienced getting a song stuck in their head.

It's known as an earworm and it comes from the German Ohrwurm, meaning a musical itch. Usually, it's a loop segment of music about 20 seconds long that seems to keep playing or repeat. Others that are longer in duration are often triggered because of some emotion charged, or it's associated with a particular memory. It might be the tune that you can't get rid of, or maybe it's the words that you keep singing over and repeatedly because of the emotions that they bring about.

While I was in college, I attended a Kansas concert at the Sioux Falls Arena. I knew the group's music very well and I found myself singing along with every one of the songs. And after the crowded arena erupted with the fever pitch excitement of singing along to the song Point of No Return, when the song ended, suddenly all of the lights went off. The music stopped, and as it became silent for a while, the noise of the crowd grew more and more silent. Then one sole light illuminated guitarist Kerry Livgren, and he began playing the melodic acoustic guitar intro to a song I was very familiar with: Dust in the Wind.

In that moment, the song began to haunt me. It stuck in my ear. A few weeks later, in preparation for Chapel Ash Wednesday service at Dakota Wesleyan, the campus minister played that song and shared that the inspiration for the song came from the writings in Psalms and Ecclesiastes.

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The words of the song for me are a reminder of how fleeting life can seem. These are some of the words:

"I close my eyes only for a moment
and the moment's gone.
All my dreams pass before my eyes.
A curiosity. Dust in the wind,
all they are is dust in the wind.

You know, as we begin this Lenten season and think about the ashes that many of us will have placed upon our head, the song Dust in the Wind can easily be a reminder to us of how fragile life is and that from dust we came and from dust we return.

That song goes on to say,
"Same old song,
We're just a drop of water in an endless sea.
All we do crumbles to the ground,
though we refuse to see.
Dust in the wind,
all we are is dust in the wind. [Kerry Livgren]

In many ways the song is right, because the things we do— the treasures that we seek to build up for ourselves on this earth, ultimately they crumble. They go away. Even when we feel as if we have put all the safeguards or protections in place, we are still confronted with endings, with our own mortality.

Another line of the song reminds us, "All your money won't another minute buy." [Kerry Livgren]

These haunting lyrics are a reminder to us on this at this Ash Wednesday that from dust we came and from dust we return, that we in a way are dust in the wind.

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In now what has been more than 40 years, prior to each Ash Wednesday, I find myself drawn to that song. Though there is some truth to the song, I don't believe that the song gets it perfect; it's not exactly right.

You see, it's not true that all we are is dust in the wind, because we're so much more. Because we're also the recipients of God's grace, God's mercy, God's steadfast love and life. We are God's beloved. And we're reminded that as we repent of our failures and sins, as we seek to live into a restored relationship with God, through Jesus, we will be spared the idea of simply being scattered into nothingness like dust in the wind.

It is in the reconciling work of God through Jesus that we are being offered the gift of grace, the gift of reconciliation, and of life. Truth is, we will still encounter hardships, experience afflictions and calamities, sleepless nights, worry and fret.

But on this Ash Wednesday, even as we're reminded of the reality of our mortality, we're also invited to let go and to let God tend to our souls, to our very beings. And as we do, that is when we experience the power of God's grace and love— God's forgiveness, and we experience the fullness of life that God wants for us.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of a Lenten journey, a season of repentance, of preparing ourselves for the coming hope and promise that is found in the transformational resurrection life of Easter. The ashes we receive remind us that though we have sinned, that we have taken our own paths, we have put distance between ourselves and others and God, that we have fallen and that we can't really get up on our own, and that we need God's help on the journey.

That we need God's forgiveness and God's grace. We need God's love.

We are being reminded that in Jesus we are offered more. There is more than just the ashes that are upon our head. There is so much more than just dust in the wind.

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There are promises, promises for us, for you and for me. The promise that as we truly open our hearts to God, as we repent of our sins and turn toward God, our hurts, our brokenness, our lives, are lovingly being held by God, we can experience forgiveness, hope, restoration, and life.