

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

February 18, 2025

Smeared in Sin, Washed in Love

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Beloved siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There's a story about a little girl at her first confession. She told the priest all about her family, her new dog, her school, and her vacations, basically her whole life. Eventually, the priest gently interrupted and asked, "Would you like to say a thing or two about your sins?" The girl answered, "That's getting kind of personal!" And yes, yes it is.

Ash Wednesday has a way of getting kind of personal. Not because God is trying to shame us. Not because the church is trying to make us feel small. But because the truth is personal. Dust is personal. Mortality is personal. Sin is personal. And grace, mercy, and love are personal too.

Tonight, we come forward and let someone touch our forehead. We let someone mark us. It's not abstract or theoretical. It's close. And the mark itself is a paradox.

An old Hasidic rabbi, Reb Simcha Bunem, taught that everyone should carry two slips of paper, one in each pocket. One says, "The world was created for me." The other says, "I am but dust and ashes." We need both. Without the first, we forget we are loved, that we matter to God, and that our lives are holy and worth protecting and healing.

But without the second slip, we forget the truth. We forget our limits and how easily we hurt each other. We forget we are not gods. Ash Wednesday asks us to hold both slips at once, and it does this with ash of all things.

But the ash is not the whole story. The ash comes to us shaped like a cross. That cross is traced on the same forehead where, long ago, we were marked with water, with God's promise, with grace and with the Holy Spirit.

So yes, tonight we will be dusty. But we are also, always, “walking wet.” Even when we feel dry. Even when we are covered in soot. Even when we are smeared in sin. We are walking wet.

The prophet Joel doesn’t invite a few spiritual overachievers into a private moment of repentance. Joel calls for a *solemn assembly*. “Gather the people,” Joel says. “Sanctify the congregation.” “Assemble the aged.” “Gather the children.” “Even infants at the breast.”

This isn’t a private self-improvement project or a moment just for the most disciplined. It’s the whole community telling the truth together. Dust is communal. We all share it, and we all return to it.

No one escapes the limits of flesh. And in the face of that shared mortality, Psalm 51 gives us words that are honest enough to name what we would rather hide: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love.” It is a psalm that refuses denial. It names the smears. The places in us and among us that are not aligned with love.

We can name them plainly. We confess our unfaithfulness to God. We confess our lackluster love for our neighbors. We confess the ways we can ignore suffering: how easy it is to scroll past, drive past, step over, rationalize away.

We confess the ways injustice becomes background noise. We confess what we do, and what we leave undone. And if we are honest, we also confess that sometimes we are not just caught in “mistakes.” Sometimes we cling to patterns. Sometimes we defend them. Sometimes we benefit from them. Ash Wednesday gets personal.

Here is the strange gift: when we tell the truth, it does not crush us. The psalm does not end in despair. It reaches boldly toward God: “Wash me.” “Purge me.” “Create in me a clean heart.” This is not the voice of someone who thinks they are beyond repair, but of someone who believes mercy is real.

There is a line from poet Nayyirah Waheed:

*the most
gorgeous thing
on*

*a human being.
vulnerability.*

Tonight, we practice vulnerability. Not as weakness, not as performance, and not as oversharing for its own sake. Vulnerability is truth-telling before God. In God's hands, vulnerability becomes the doorway for power to enter, not the power that dominates, but the power that brings new life.

In Matthew 6, Jesus does not condemn prayer, fasting, or generosity. He assumes we will practice them. But Jesus points out the trap: we can turn even holy things into masks, piety into a costume, and spirituality into a performance.

A Jesuit theologian, Ladislaus Boros, said, "One day all masks must fall, all roles too must come to an end, all the parts that we play before the world and before ourselves." That's what Ash Wednesday is about. Masks fall, roles loosen, and we stand before God with less to manage, less to prove, and less to protect.

Jesus says, do not practice your piety to be seen. Do not let your generosity become trumpet-blowing. Do not let prayer become a stage. Do not let fasting become a billboard.

Instead, Jesus offers what the church has long called the three disciplines of Lent:

- **Almsgiving**
- **Prayer**
- **Fasting**

These are not ways to earn God or impress people. They are practices that realign the heart. Jesus ends this section by telling the truth about desire: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

So Lent asks: What is your treasure? What do you protect? What do you seek first? What do you spend yourself on? And what if, for these forty days, we practiced in a way that helps our hearts move back toward love?

That might mean fasting from food, yes. But it might also mean fasting from things that dull our compassion. Fasting from social media, if it keeps us numb and angry. Fasting from gossip, if it trains us to consume each other. Fasting from unnecessary driving, fasting from fossil fuels used carelessly, if it helps us remember the

neighbor we will never meet, but who will inherit the air and water we leave behind.

Fasting is not about punishing the body. It is about refusing self-indulgence as a way of life. It is about making room to notice. And that brings us to the watchword we're to carry this week, one I preached on last Sunday too: **Listen**. Because prayer, fasting, and giving are not just disciplines. They are ways of becoming people who can actually listen.

Listen to God beneath the noise. Listen to your own heart without running away. Listen to the cries of your neighbors. Listen to the earth. Listen to what is true.

And then Paul comes in with a line that refuses delay: "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" Not later. Not once we've gotten ourselves together. Not once we've been good enough at Lent. Now. Because here is the gospel we need on Ash Wednesday: we are not using Lent to crawl back to God as if God has been absent. Paul says we have **already** been reconciled. God has **already** moved toward us in Christ. Christ has **already** entered our dust. Christ has **already** carried our sin. Christ has **already** stepped into death and broken it from the inside.

So when we "return to the Lord," we are not coming back to an angry God we have to convince. We are returning to the God who has been calling our name all along. That's why the ash is shaped like a cross, even our honesty about death is held inside God's promise of life.

The ash cross is traced over the place where baptism marked you first. So you may come forward tonight and feel the grit. But beneath the grit is grace. You may feel the smear. But beneath the smear is love. You may leave with a sign of mortality. But you leave, still, walking wet.

There's a meme that circulates every Ash Wednesday, joking about the way the cross is drawn on someone's forehead, and what it "says" about the pastor who drew it. It's funny, and it's harmless. But it asks a better question than it knows: What does this mark say about us?

It says we belong. It says we are not self-made. It says we will die, and we are loved anyway. It says God is not afraid of our dust. God is the kind of God who makes astonishing things out of ash.

So tonight, I want to invite you to come forward for ashes, not as a badge of spiritual seriousness, not as a performance of humility, but as a truth you can carry: you are dust, yes. And you are **beloved** dust.

And as you come, I want to invite you to choose one action for this week, one concrete practice that aligns your treasure with your heart. One act of generosity that costs you something real. One habit of prayer that helps you listen. One fast that makes room for your neighbor.

Not to earn salvation. But because “now” is the time. Because the day of salvation is not only a future hope. It is a present invitation. We will leave tonight still marked, still carrying the cross-shaped trace of sin and death. But we will also leave washed. We will leave walking wet. Drenched in mercy. Held by steadfast love. And carried, all the way through the dust, toward resurrection. Amen.