

Ash Wednesday, 2013

Text: Genesis 1:1-2:3

Title: Ash to ash

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When I hear the story of creation, and when I picture it in my head, one of the places that comes to mind is Yellowstone National Park. My mom grew up in Laurel, Montana, just a couple of hours from Yellowstone. We would go back to Montana every summer growing up, and often spent a few days in Yellowstone.

Yellowstone is truly a magnificent place. Majestic mountains tower above you with snow-capped peaks. There are verdant forests and lush meadows filled with wildflowers. Eagles soar in the sky, and herds of Bison and Elk roam the valleys. There are rivers and waterfalls, pools with every color of the rainbow. Hot springs and geysers bubbling up from the ground and shooting fountains of water into the air. It's simply glorious.

But it's not always quiet and peaceful in Yellowstone. In the summer of 1989 wildfires threatened much of the park. I was at my grandparents' house that summer. And you could see the smoke and haze on the horizon as the park burned. And then, when the wind was right, ash from the forest fires would fall to the ground like black snow, covering every surface with a dirty, grimy film.

Today we cover our heads with ash, the remnants of the beautiful palms that graced our altar last Palm Sunday. It's a reminder of what our sin does to God's creation and our own bodies.

The world God created was perfect and beautiful. It was orderly, with everything in its place. Light and dark, sea and sky, land and water, sun, moon and stars, plants, birds, fish, and animals each according to its kind. God saw that it was very good.

In that very good world there was no illness, no suffering, no death, everything was harmonious and at peace.

That peace was shattered by sin. Sin brought pain and suffering, discord and strife, and ultimately death into this world. Sin reduced paradise to ashes. The world that you see around you, even beautiful places like Yellowstone, Yosemite, the Grand Canyon, Niagara, the Everglades, these are a mere shadow of what God created them to be. Even in places like this there is violence and death, fire, floods, avalanches and blizzards.

Sin not only affects the world around us, it affects you personally. The ashes on your forehead mark you for death. Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Because of your sin, you will die.

You see the effects of sin whenever you walk into a hospital or nursing home, when you see people suffering in body and in mind.

You see the effects of sin most clearly when you stand in a cemetery, at the graveside of someone you love, and you hear those words spoken one last time, “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

If you go back to Yellowstone today, you will still see the effects of the '89 fires, but you will also see signs of rebirth and new life. The death that the fires brought has cleared the way for new growth.

The problem was for years, the people in Yellowstone put out the fires right away, not realizing that the fires were necessary to clear out the underbrush and keep the forest healthy. Those fires, that dust and ash was needed to rejuvenate the soil.

Death is necessary for you to live as well.

First, we die in baptism, as we are joined to the death of Christ, and drowned. Baptism is a good thing, because it puts to death the old sinful person in us, but also gives us new birth and new life to live in the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Second, we die in confession, as we confess our sins, our faults, our failure to live as we should. Confession is a good thing, because we put to death the sin and evil in us once more, and then the Lord brings us back to life with the words of forgiveness in absolution.

Finally, we die when we fall asleep in Jesus, but that is not the end, either. Since Jesus rose from the dead, you, too will rise. You will not lay in dust and ashes forever, but your body will be made new once more in the new creation on the last day.

On that day, the Lord will remake all of creation. He will restore Paradise once more, better than Yellowstone or any National Park, more beautiful than you could ever imagine.

And you will be a part of that, too. Just as humankind was the pinnacle of the first creation, so you will be pinnacle of the new creation, and live there in Paradise forever.

Death is never the end. Death was not the end for Jesus, and it will not be the end for you. We don't live in Lent forever, but look forward to Easter in 40 short days. The death and ashes of Lent are here to clear out the sin in your life, so that you will have new life with Jesus in the resurrection.