

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Black drapes our altar, pulpit, and lectern tonight. Black is the color for mourning — not just in the church. The world knows it, and at the funeral of a loved one, as they are walking *“through the valley of the shadow of death”* (Ps. 23:4), people put on black.

Tonight we are in black because tonight we are pondering our mortality—not just our humanity, but humanity’s sentence: *“in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”* (Gen. 2:17). Adam did eat, and Adam died. And from thence, so did all who followed Adam, all those *“fathered ... in his own likeness, after his image”* (Gen. 5:3): Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, everyone begotten of Adam. The death bell tolled for all these: *“and he died”* (Gen. 5:5, 8, 11, etc.).

No, I haven’t forgotten — there are exceptions. To be sure, *“Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him”* (Gen. 5:24), and *“Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven”* amidst *“chariots of fire and horses of fire”* (2 Ki. 2:11), but these two exceptions merely prove the rule that those born in the natural way from Adam cannot escape the dreadful consequences of Adam’s sin.

We are Adam’s offspring, and so we are mortal, subject to death; for us, too, *“in the very midst of life, death has us surrounded”* (LSB755:1). Indeed, death is never far off, as the recent tornados in Alabama and Georgia remind us — not even for children as young as 6, 10, and 11. We cannot know when God may say: *“This night your soul is required of you”* (Luke 12:20).

Of course, death has us in its clutches because of sin, not just Adam’s but our own. We acknowledge that we are sinners from birth, conceived in sin and brought forth in iniquity (Ps. 51:5). We sometime confess: *“we are by nature sinful and unclean.”* In catechism terms, we call that *“original sin,”* or sometimes *“the Old Adam in us”* (Luther, SC, What does such baptizing with water indicate?). That just reflects what St. Paul writes: *“sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned”* (Rom. 5:12).

And, if I may say it this way, this sin is the worst. It is certainly sin and deserving of God’s judgment all by itself. This sin has wrought death in mankind all on its own, but this sin is also that which entices us and drives us to sin ourselves, and those things *“in thought, word, and deed”* that *“we have done”* and *“left undone”* also merit death, as St. Paul has said, *“the wages of sin is death”* (Rom. 6:23).

And so, we’re here tonight remembering that we *“are dust and to dust [we] shall return”* as God told the contrite Adam of the consequences of his death

sentence. But remember that man is more than merely the body fashioned from the dust of the earth. He has been given “*the breath of life*”; he was made “*a living creature*” (Gen. 2:7). So that in death, the soul of the believer is carried to the bosom of Abraham, while the body decays in its narrow chamber. The teacher said it this way: “*the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it*” (Ecc. 12:7)—the believer’s spirit returns to God and awaits the resurrection of his flesh.

Not so, the unbeliever. Torment awaits him (Luke 16:23). And physical death brings this into focus: “In the midst of death’s dark vale Pow’rs of hell o’ertake us” (LSB755:2). Truly, the sting of death is not merely the demise of the body. No, “*the sting of death is sin*” (1 Cor. 15:56), unrepented, unforgiven sin, sin bound to unbelievers in impenitence, and it results in the “*second death*” (Rev. 20:14). Their ultimate demise will occur when Jesus comes again in glory. Then those who died mired in sin and unbelief will receive the curse of an eternal punishment in “*the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*” (Matt. 25:41). As Jesus said, “*whoever does not believe will be condemned*” (Mark 16:16).

But for those who cry out in repentance to Jesus out of the depths of their depravity (Ps. 130:1-4), for those who look to Jesus as their savior from the wretchedness of their sin, for those who trust in Jesus for deliverance from this body of death (Rom. 7:24-25), for those who have died with Christ in Holy Baptism and been raised to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3-4), there is no second death for them (Rev. 20:6). There is only resurrection and glory and incorruption and everlasting life. “*Whoever believe and is baptized shall be saved*” (Mark 16:16).

Therefore, draped in black we ponder our mortality tonight —“*remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return*”—but we do not despair of it, for, looking to Jesus, though we die, yet shall we live (John 11:25). A small token of the instrument of His life-giving wounds marks our foreheads, but it’s no display of vanity. We’re not boasting in ourselves. We’re boasting in the cross. This mark on our forehead is signaling our “*return to [Him] with all [our] heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.*” We’re rending our hearts in contrition and repentance tonight, trusting that through His Son, “*the LORD [our] God ... gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love*” will relent and not give us the “*disaster*” we deserve, but give us His grace. We’re trusting that He will bring us through death to life.

May our daily return be a good start of our holy observance of Lent.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.