

“Ash Wednesday”
Mark 1:1-28
Pastor Jacob Hanson
02/22/2023

Opening Prayer

“From dust you came, and to dust you shall return.” The words that will be spoken to you and over you this evening are solemn and grave. They are a stark reminder, one that has been used for a very long time at the outset of Lent, to showcase the truth. Beloved, we are made from the dust, and in time we will die and our bodies will return to it. That is the physical reality for all of us. From the youngest in the room who is just beginning to the very oldest who is not far from death, in time all of us will bodily return to the ground from whence we were created. That stark truth, one that we put out of our minds most of the time in our busy world, is given plainly so that we will remember that we are not physical in nature alone. Yes, in time we will all die, but we also are given the wonderful and glorious truth that our Creator has made a way for us to spend eternity with Him. Our souls, Beloved, exist beyond the grave, and so it is very good for us to be concerned with our souls even more than our bodily life. Our Savior, Jesus, rose up after three days after being crucified. Killed for our sins, He too was buried. But He did not remain dead. After those days He arose triumphantly as He had promised, proving His divinity. He ascended to heaven shortly thereafter, from whence He reigns. Fully God and fully man, His resurrection did more than just prove His divinity. It also opened the door to eternal life for all who believe in Him. You and I, as Christians, are recipients of that great and wonderful gift. Beloved, in time we will return to the dust, but we have been marked by Christ as His. For those of you who believe, you have been marked for eternal life, salvation of your sins, a freedom and peace that this world never knows. Just as Christ arose from the dead, so too do you and I on the last day. If you are wondering what the symbolism of the ashes and cross are as we enter Lent this evening, it is this. You will in time pass, but as Christ’s followers you will not stay in the ground just as He did not. You and I will rise again, thanks to His gracious and merciful gift that He gave to us by His body and blood. That, Beloved, is what we celebrate and remember over the next forty days of Lent.

Every year for Lent, at least since I have been here, we have examined a theme through the lens of one of the Gospels. Last year we looked at forgiveness and

spent most of our time in the Gospel of Luke. This year we are going to read through most of the Gospel of Mark, and we will be highlighting God's mercy all throughout. Mercy, it should be noted, is not receiving that which one deserves. Christ comes and lives and dies and rises again so that you and I may receive the greatest mercy of all. The punishment for sins is death, eternal death, yet the Lord took that punishment for us and extended to us His mercy. The story of this mercy in Mark begins with the very telling statement: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

The Gospel of Mark is written in the same vein as like a sports newspaper column. It doesn't speak too much about anything extra, but goes right for the highlights. Mark is filled with Jesus's greatest miracles and most of His greatest teachings, albeit in a shortened manner when compared to Luke or John. It is thought that this Gospel is actually written by Mark as the account given to him by Peter, as it contains intimate details about Peter's life. After the opening statement about Jesus's divinity, it gets right into His baptism and ministry.

John the Baptist comes, as prophesied in Isaiah, proclaiming a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Many come into the wilderness to hear him preach and to be baptized. He speaks clearly that he is not the Messiah, but only the messenger. The One who comes later is so much great that John states "I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals." He also tells the people "I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." It is at this time that Jesus comes forth to be baptized.

Up until this point Jesus has lived a mostly normal life. He is without sin, He has a truly miraculous birth account, and He is well aware of who He is, but He has chosen to live as everyone else just without sin until He comes to the Jordan. At roughly 30 years of age, Jesus is baptized by John (amidst protests as recounted in the disciple John's Gospel) and the Lord immediately speaks from heaven. "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased." The Jesus is immediately after compelled to begin His ministry. It doesn't begin in preaching and teaching as we would expect, but rather with forty days of fasting in the wilderness.

In the wilderness Jesus is tempted by Satan. While He is fully God, He is also fully man. Jesus cannot sin, but He can be tempted. With food (He was fasting), with pride, and with power Satan tries to beat down Jesus. We often forget what it

means for Christ to be fully man, that He understands temptation and how trying it is for us. He understands Beloved, the struggles you and I have He gets, even though He is without sin. After being tempted for those forty days, angels minister to Jesus and thus He begins His public ministry. He goes into the region of Galilee to preach and to do many miracles.

As He arrives, several of His disciples are chosen. Two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew and James and John, all four fishermen by trade, are told to come and follow Him. They leave behind their nets and follow Christ into the city of Capernaum. Jesus, leading the way, brings them into the synagogue on the Sabbath and He starts to teach. The first miracle shown in Mark occurs when a demon possessed man in the synagogue stands up and screams “What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are... the Holy One of God!” Jesus rebukes the demon, and casts it out of the man with nothing more than a command. “Be quiet, and come out of him!” From this point on, the fame of Christ will spread. He performs miracles as no one else can. He preaches and teaches with authority that is beyond everyone else. In time, as we well know, He will show what He has come to earth to do. To grant mercy to any who would receive it, Jesus has come to die and rise again.

Beloved, there are many things we could examine in this short first half of Mark 1. There are lots of things we could talk about with regards to Lent and Ash Wednesday. But it seems appropriate from time to time to just focus on the basics and upon the truth. Your Lord loved you and I enough to come and dwell amongst us, to preach and teach and live and die and rise again, so that we might obtain mercy and enter eternal life. In a moment you will receive the ashes upon your forehead if you so choose. They represent how you have been marked, set apart, and claimed by your Lord. The same Messiah who came preaching and teaching and performing miracles and casting out demons, has set you apart from the world. Though you may die in this life, your body returning to the dust from whence it first came, you will rise again by His hand and by His mercy. Praise the Lord for His mercy upon us. Let us pray.

Closing Prayer