

ASH WEDNESDAY SERVICE
Dusty People (Psalm 103:8-18 NRSV)
Rev. Melissa Hatfield
First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO
February 17, 2021

WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/ash-wednesday-reflection-dusty-people/>

February 7, 1885, is the day American writer and playwright Sinclair Lewis was born. A satirical writer of American life and culture in the 20s with classics like *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, Lewis was the first American ever to win the Nobel Prize. Yet, for all his renown and wealth, Lewis died in Rome of alcoholism at the age of 65.

The story goes that upon his death in 1951, he was cremated, and his ashes sent to Rome's U.S. Embassy to be returned to the states. One morning a visitor noticed a worker on her knees with a dustpan and broom. Next to her was an overturned memorial urn. When asked what she was doing, she replied nonchalantly, "Sweeping up Sinclair Lewis."ⁱ

Stories like these are sobering reminders of the fragility of life. As if we needed any reminders of this truth in this past year. Life's delicate nature has been at the forefront of our minds as we endure a global virus, mourning the death of nearly 2.5 million worldwide due to COVID, nearly half a million in our own country. Add to this other loss – death of loved ones for other reasons, loss of gathering with others as we wish or the celebration of milestone events, or the loss of a million simple little things we took for granted. We find ourselves humbled by the reminders of how quickly things, and our very lives, can be nonchalantly swept up as life continues with the next task at hand.

Facing our fragility, our weakness can feel depressing. I get it. I understand why a service focused on marking ourselves with ashes and reminding each other we're all going to die isn't exactly Hallmark and Disney. I recognize embracing our mortality flies in the face of our culture's obsession with immortality. But for those who have experienced great loss, many have learned there is also something liberating about accepting our mortality rather than denying or avoiding the inevitable. In fact, it's incredibly bold to just blurt out the truth as if it's not offensive at all - *We are dust and to dust we will return!* Once we declare it, it's almost like we can finally exhale and receive the gift that comes with surrendering to who we really are – dusty people.

You know who else is mindful of our fragility? Our Creator.

Our Psalm today is a beautiful song of remembrance and thanksgiving – a remembrance of who we are and thanksgiving for who the LORD is and how the LORD deals with us.

V. 8- 13

8 The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

9 He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.

10 He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

12 as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.

13 As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.

These verses focus on the nature of God – God, full of mercy, grace, and loyal love does not deal with us according to our sins. Rather, God is merciful, compassionate, and loyal in love to us, God’s children.

In then in **vv. 14-16**, the focus shifts to who we are:

14 For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.

15 As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field;

16 for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.

God has compassion on us **for** God remembers how we were made. God remembers forming us from dust and breathing life into us. How intimate. How personal. There is a unique bond between a creator and their creation, and it is that bond that is the source of God’s compassion for us, God’s children. Now as humans, it is easy to read these three verses about being dust and mortal and feel a sense of insecurity and fear, realizing our vulnerability and helplessness. Perhaps this is why the psalmist has placed the reminder of our fragile state in the middle of these two beautiful, bubble-wrap passages declaring who God is. VV.8-13 remind us God is merciful, compassionate, and loyal in love to us, God’s children. VV. 14-16 remind us we are dust but quickly come vv. 17-18, returning to focus once again on who God is.

vv. 17-18,

17 But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting

on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children,

18 to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

If the truth of our lives were only that we are dust and that was the last word, then yes – this would be a bummer of service, and I, too, would stop watching. But this not the last word. Our mortality is not the last word, nor is our brokenness the last word. God is the last word. And let us not forget what God can do with dust.

We are mortal but death is not final. We're broken, but we have a Savior. The acceptance of this, which we pronounce on Ash Wednesday, is freeing to us and music to God's ears. When we embrace this, the real journey can begin. As followers of Christ, we are Resurrection people. This is absolutely true. But we are also Ash Wednesday people, and Maundy Thursday people, and Good Friday people, too. We need every step along this 40-day journey to the cross to remind us who we are and to hold our identity between two beautiful, bubble-wrap truths about who God is ... our merciful, compassionate, and loyal-in-love God who remembers how we were made.

Our Lent series is titled *Fixer Upper: Renovation of the Heart*. We love the idea of renovating. Entire television networks are devoted to popular renovation shows. We invest tons of money and time in renovating our houses, our cars, our closets. But what about investing in the renovation of our heart? This Lent, we want to create space and invite God to do what only God can do in renovating our lives.

If you've been a part of any major renovation project, you know the challenges that can develop along the way. What might start as a simple project leads to discoveries of things that need to be worked on if the project is to be done right. We know the risk and the cost of avoiding the non-glamorous, foundational, hidden work, so let's give God access to work in every area of our lives. We also know that renovations can involve a lot of dust. We spend a lot of time and money trying to clean up all the dust that results from the renovation. At the end of our series on Easter Sunday, when all the dust settles, we will still be dusty people because that is who we are. But rather than a nuisance to be cleaned up, my hope is that we will wear our dust as a beautiful reminder of who we are, dusty people the Lord has not dealt with according to our sins, but according to God's compassion, mercy, and loyal love.

And tonight, as we are marked with what has made it through the burning, may the ashes imposed in the sign of the cross upon our forehead or hand, remind us that, by the grace of God, death is not the end. We are not abandoned. We are not forsaken. God is merciful, compassionate, and loyal in love to us, God's dusty people.

ⁱ *On This Day*, (Crescent Books 1992); Clifton Fadiman, *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes*, (Little, Brown & Co., 1985)