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22 February 2023 — Ash Wednesday
Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Only the Beginning

1 Corinthians 15:45-49, emended

Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the physical and then the spiritual. The first person was from the earth, made of dust; the second person is from heaven. As one of dust, so are those who are of the dust, and as one of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the one of dust, we will also bear the image of the one of heaven.

Dust is the least common denominator of humanity. It is the basic property of everything. We are dust—star dust, atoms flung from the beginning of time, and, only recently in the grand timeline, melded together. In the end, we are dust. Recognizing this could fill us with wonder, awe at what we hold in common with one another, with the things we see that, at first glance, appear so different from us. It *could* fill us with wonder, to remember that, in the end, we are dust, but often it fills us with dread. Because, in the *end*, we are dust. But dust is only ever a beginning to God.

Once, many years ago now, I was strapping a toddler Hope into her car seat. It was one of those gorgeous, mild late-fall afternoons. I had parked our minivan under our neighbor’s sugar maple, and the remaining leaves made the sunlight stream into the van, setting the specks of dust ablaze. And in the chatter of a parent and a child with a growing understanding of the world, I marveled about how the dust looked like stars, and that they really were stars in a way, for they were made of the same dust. It seemed a lovely, whimsical conversation, but when I looked up from the harness buckle into Hope’s face, she was panicking. At maybe three years old, she had never before considered that she might one day *not be* anymore. That one day, she would *end*.

T. S. Eliot wrote in *The Waste Land*

There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

Dust reminds us that we can cease to be. We can end. We can end in a million ways. The brokenness of this world can permanently divorce us into before and after selves, bringing

an end to what we once knew and who we once were. Before and after COVID, 9/11, the cancer, the divorce, the arrest, the pink slip, the tragedy. We fumble around searching for an elusive “new normal,” when all we really long for is what once was. Impermanent, we divide ourselves from our neighbors, bringing to an end relationships, an end to futures. We are dust. We are finite. We end.

For us, dust is an ending, but for God, dust is always a beginning.

Despite what you see on tv, the final words of the funeral liturgy are not “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” It is not dirt thrown on the coffin, but a hand raised in blessing: “The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord’s face shine upon you with grace and mercy, the Lord look upon you favor and give you peace.” For God, dust is always a beginning.

In Genesis, after all, it is out of dust that humanity is formed. Into a dusty sculpture God breathes life, forever connecting humanity with God’s spirit. God promises Abraham and Isaac and Jacob more offspring than the grains of dust, and that, even when scattered, they will be a blessing. Numbering each speck of dust is impossible for a person, but God has done it, and if God can complete that unbelievable task, then perhaps we can begin to believe that even when we have found our end as dust and ash, God will yet resurrect us to a new beginning.

We come today, to this day of fasting and repentance, to this Ash Wednesday, to confess to God, to tell the truth about our sin, and the truth is mostly this: that we have allowed ourselves to end in a million different ways each day, separating ourselves from all the ways God’s love flows through us, reducing all that we are to specks, giving into despair, and doing the same to our neighbor, all while neglecting to trust that dust is only the beginning for God.

Beloved, telling the truth about the world as it is is our freedom as a Christian. Not to sugar coat it, but to state honestly the truth: we end. Every day. And at the last. All that is, will end. We are surrounded by endings we would not choose for ourselves; we author endings for those we refused to befriend. But we also tell the truth about God who, as pastor and poet Thom Shuman puts it,

 mixes all the ashes
 of our failed promises
 to be more faithful
 more just
 more loving
 with the dust we
 have shaken from our feet
 as we took our own paths,
 using them to mark
 the Godhead on this

pilgrimage of trust.

It is only when we have named the endings we have caused because of our own fear that we can begin to act instead in the love that formed us in the first place and resist the despair that wants to claim us. Beloved Siblings in Christ, we are dust, that is the end. In and by the grace of God, let us begin.

Amen.