

From Pastor Marissa Becklin

Ashes To Ashes, Dust To Dust

On Ash Wednesday we are reminded that God has created us for and called us into abundant life. Now, there are a lot of forces in this world that try to tell us they can sell us life abundant, or to convince us that we can somehow earn it. They come from advertisements and commercials, they come from world leaders, schools. And sometimes we hear the whispering in our own heads—that maybe if I can just get this quota or make that sale or get this grade or hit that weight that I'll be good enough. I'll be happier. But those messages are lies. They will leave us with fleeting feelings and moments. This is not what abundant life is all about.

What can it mean to have abundant life when we live in such a hurting world? When we feel the symptoms of brokenness every day?

Abundant life, real, everlasting, flourishing life, is not the kind of stuff we see promised on TV advertisements. It's not flashy. And that's because the abundant life that Jesus speaks of is born not out of glory, but out of ashes—through the dusty stuff of death. Abundant life is about knowing that we are loved, really, seriously, truly loved, by one whose love is perfect. So perfect that it goes to the cross.

Abundant life is life rooted in the knowledge that we are loved beyond compare by God, the one who knows us best. The one who knows our hearts, who knows—really knows—about our rebellion, and sin, and about all of the junk that we cling to that threatens to separate us from God and others. God knows about all of the self-doubt, the blame, the shame, the hatred, the judgment, the denial that clouds our hearts and minds. Even when God knows about all of it, God is all-in. God sends Jesus, who lives and breathes and dies with us. Jesus meets us in the middle of our pain (both the pain that we feel and the pain that we cause others) and offers us forgiveness and new life. *That*, dear friends, is true love—the opportunity and ability to apologize for what we've done and experience real, life-altering forgiveness. *That* is the stuff of abundant life—love that is so perfect and true that it leaves room for honesty about ourselves—love that sets us free from the lies that we tell ourselves, love that sets us free from shame. Love that ultimately sets us free from death. We encounter this love not in Hallmark cards, but in the opportunity for real repentance. In the cross. In ashes.

On Ash Wednesday we remember that we are dust, beloved, beloved dust, and that we will return to dust some day. We also remember that we are loved fiercely and perfectly by God which means that even in the face of death, on the night when we trace ash on our foreheads and speak the truth about ourselves and this world that can sometimes leave us feeling so hollow and exhausted, ashes, dust, and death are not the end of our story (though they are part of it). We are invited by God on Ash Wednesday and throughout the forty days of Lent to really enter into this mystery of true love, into honest examination of our lives, and into the possibility of real repentance.

As those ashes are traced on our foreheads this month in the same way that oil was traced on our foreheads at our baptism, we remember that being baptized into Christ's love means being baptized into Christ's death—a death that has swallowed up our death, a death that gives us hope for abundant life. Those ashes will take the shape of the cross, the place where God transforms our shame and brokenness into connection and love. The place where God defeats death once and for all because God loves us so much, just the way we are, and craves connection with us so deeply that God wants to be with us forever.

These ashes are a reminder of our baptisms in the past, our funerals in the future, and the promise that we come from God and to God we shall go. We let so much else get in the way of that truth, but that is what really matters. We are God's, and there is no sin, darkness or grave that God will not come to find us in and love us back to life.

Those ashes will remind us that these breaths we take are fleeting, but that God is steadfast. That the world is a scary, dark place, but that we walk through it as people who are cradled in love. That death is a part of our story, but that it doesn't have the final word. The promises of Christ will outlast all things, and belong to us not because of anything we have done to deserve them, but because of God's deep and abiding love for us.

So, beloved, remember that we are all God's beloved dust, and to dust we shall return one day wrapped in the promises of Christ.

In Christ, Pastor Marissa