

## Symbols of Lent: Ashes

### 1 Samuel 2:1-10 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> Then Hannah prayed and said: "My heart rejoices in the LORD; in the LORD my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance. <sup>2</sup> "There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. <sup>3</sup> "Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed. <sup>4</sup> "The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength. <sup>5</sup> Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry are hungry no more. She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away. <sup>6</sup> "The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. <sup>7</sup> The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. <sup>8</sup> He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor. "For the foundations of the earth are the LORD'S; on them he has set the world. <sup>9</sup> He will guard the feet of his faithful servants, but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness. "It is not by strength that one prevails; <sup>10</sup> those who oppose the LORD will be broken. The Most High will thunder from heaven; the LORD will judge the ends of the earth. "He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed."

I'm going to give you a little insight into the mind of your pastor: I actually think about what kind of tone that needs to be conveyed for each worship service. Every Sunday morning service, it's a no-brainer to start with saying, "Good morning," but then I think about, "How can I say this so that people know that this is the day the Lord has made and that this is a time of rejoicing and being glad, no matter what else happened this morning or this past week?" So, I think about the pitch, the facial expressions to use, where I am looking, all of that. In evening services, as we will have for the next six weeks, it's more of a meditative atmosphere. You've probably had a long day. You are looking to go home and rest, maybe even just go straight to bed after this. So, I'm not going to use this service to charge you up in the same way I would hope a morning service does. This is a time to be glad that we are here, with a smile instead of exuberant rejoicing, to end your day in the care and comfort of the arms of the Lord. So, I want to convey happiness that's a little subdued, glad to end the day with the Lord. For festival services like Palm Sunday, Christmas, and Easter, you want to ratchet it up to 11 on the amp of joy, to show that you have so much happiness that you can barely contain it with the people who have come to share that with you. Then there are weddings. You pretty much never want the smile to leave your face during a wedding, even if someone is crying, because you know that those are tears of joy – at least, I hope and pray that they are. You're not there to make people feel guilty about getting married or to depress them with the realistic picture of the problems that they will have specifically because they are going to be a married couple. You are there to convey that wonderful blessing of a gift given in perfection that we as sinful humans are still so privileged to enjoy in a sinful world. Then there are funerals. As a pastor (not as a member), I have the unique and blessed privilege to give people God's Word of hope at one of the most hopeless and jarring times of life. When I preside over the service of a brother or sister in Christ, I know that they are in heaven. I get to convey that idea, that preview and reality, of what heaven is like for them, that all their cares, their worries, their health problems, their failings, are now all gone because God loved them and took them home. So, I respectfully smile through the comfort while giving the comforting Word of God realizing at the same time people are grieving. My tone on that day is to give hope, joy, assurance, and comfort.

What about Ash Wednesday? Ash Wednesday is a bit of a stumper for me. What kind of emotion should I convey to you tonight? Admittedly, I feel a little weird when people come up to receive the imposition of ashes because I have two conflicting emotions. On the one hand, I am rejoicing when I see you walk into church, as you walk up to receive the ashes on your forehead or hand. You are here to worship with me. You took time out of a hectic week on a Wednesday night to be here for God's Word. So, I naturally have this great big smile. On the other hand, my smile falters because I'm about to smear ashes on your forehead or hand to remind you that you are going to die. "For dust you are, and to dust you will return." One day, either you won't be coming to an Ash Wednesday service anymore or I won't be around leading an Ash Wednesday service. And it's not because we moved or were sick or plain didn't want to come. No, one day one of us won't be here because you, me, we will die. I'm happy that you are here; I'm sad that I am basically here to say to you tonight, "You're going to die." It's a happy-sad moment, a happy-sad service.

Even the ashes themselves are kind of happy-sad. The ashes that we use have a happy memory attached to them because these ashes came from our Palm Sunday worship. Palm Sunday is one of those events when you can't help but smile and rejoice and sing loud because we are welcoming our King. Palm Sunday means louds shouts of "Hosanna!" and "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" I burned those palm branches left over from that service. The ashes that I used tonight, that are on you tonight, they come from that joyous service. It's happy, but it's also sad because those palm branches are now nothing more than ashes. Those palm branches did not last just like the joy of Palm Sunday worship did not last with us. These ashes are happy-sad.

The Bible reinforces this picture. You heard in Genesis chapter 2 verse 7: "Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." From dust, from ashes, God made the complex human being, so intricate, so wonderful. Then one chapter later, after Adam, that same man whom God had formed out of the dust of the ground had then broken God's command, we hear from God to Adam: "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." (Genesis 3:19) When I put the ashes on you, those are the words I say. I am repeating a curse to you. "For dust you are and to dust you will return." It amazes me then that any of you actually want these ashes on you. It's a symbol of death, of disobedience, of everything that is wrong with the world. Any other person coming here tonight, what would they think? Would they hear what I am saying right now and casually slip out through the side door because they don't want to be marked with death.

These ashes represent a truth that none of us want to think about. Even without the ashes, you are marked for death. Unless Jesus returns before it happens, you will die. Your body will suffer the same curse as Adam. "For dust you are and to dust you will return." You are going to die. You are going to die because you sinned, just like Adam did. The curse that says you will turn you back into ashes will come to you.

This is why many people in the Old Testament of the Bible showed their sorrow over their sins like Job did: "Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 4:6) For what I did, God, I deserve to die. I deserve to be turned to dust. I'm not making light of it. This is truly what I deserve, just like Adam did. All I can say is that I'm sorry God. I hate myself for doing what I did. I want to never do it again. That's what these ashes mean. Now where's that special school assembly to talk about self-esteem because I need a pick-me-up.

Amazingly, even in using these ashes, there is a pick-me-up. Instead of saying, "Well, you don't need to feel bad for yourself" or "You are worth more than a pile of ashes. How dare that preacher say that about you," there is a reason why these ashes were used to create a specific symbol on you. Even as you came up and I reminded you, "For dust you are and to dust you will return," that you are going to die because you are a sinner, those ashes were put on you in the shape of a cross.

"But a cross is a symbol of death. That's where Jesus died." And you are right. But more is going on there than just another senseless death. Yes, Jesus died on the cross, but he did so as true God and true Man. He died, but his body did not see decay, just as God had foretold. Jesus' body did not turn to dust. No, in three days of his death, Jesus came back to life. He stopped the process. He overcame decomposition. He used his death to satisfy God's justice over all the wrongdoings that you and I, that every human has ever done in the history of the world. Jesus nailed that charge of sin that we owed God for and took it away, nailing it to the cross.

Because Jesus himself died for us on the cross and then rose from the dead and lives now still with his body that does not and will not return to dust or ashes, he promises to do the same for us. He promises to clothe our mortal bodies with immortality. He will do this on the Last Day, take that dust that you returned to and return it to you as your body, fully intact, never to decay or return to dust again. On that day, death will be swallowed up in victory because Jesus' death for us on the cross already conquered death for us. In this way Jesus has taken away the sting of death.

That's why God promises to lift us up from the ashes. This is what Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2 confesses. Hannah was a woman who was unable to have children for a long time. A rival to her kept shaming her for her barrenness, prodding her that she was less of a woman because she could not have kids, maybe even suggesting that God hated her and that's why she couldn't conceive, that he made her womb die. But Hannah prayed and prayed and prayed, and the Lord brought life instead of death and granted her a son, a boy whom she dedicated to serve the Lord his whole life. His name was Samuel.

Our reading from 1 Samuel chapter 2 is her prayer of thanksgiving to God as she gave her son to the high priest because Samuel was old enough to now serve the Lord. Hannah realized that she could never fix her dead womb. She could not force herself to conceive a child. Even the mightiest warriors are defeated on the battlefield while the weakest take the field and the victory. One who has plenty can quickly become one who has nothing, and the one who has nothing can quickly become the one who has everything. It is the LORD who does these things. Hannah prayed, "The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up...He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor." (verses 6, 8) It is the Lord who lifts us up from the ash heap of death. He makes us alive, not just at the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day when our bodies will be raised and restored like Jesus', but he has made us alive even today. Jesus' cross brings us life. There Jesus satisfied God's wrath over our sins. There he died in order to lift us up from the ash heap and give us spiritual life through the forgiveness of sins won by his life.

Yes, I will die. You will die. We will return to ashes "for dust we are and to dust we will return" because of sin. But Jesus died on the cross so that we would live, that he would make us live – today, then after we die, and after that when he raises our bodies on the last day so that our bodies will never become ash again. In this way, Ash Wednesday is happy-sad. So, I will smile to you tonight as I look at the cross made out of ashes that you proudly display because I know that the Lord has raised you and me up from the ash

heap by the cross and that has given us the promise that even though we return to ashes, one day we will be restored and we will never become ashes again. Amen.

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March 1, 2017

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