

Sermon Ash Wednesday 1 Peter 1;8-12 2-10-16 Pastor Michael Schempf Zion, Clyman, WI

Though the word of discredited bicycling champion Lance Armstrong has become widely recognized as untruthful, he once said something that was so absolutely true, so unimpeachable, so dead right that virtually no one could argue with him. Noting the effects of age on his body he said, "I can't argue with time." He acknowledged that over time a physical decline affects the body, even his athletic body. After hitting a physical peak sometime in your 20's the scale begins to tip the other way. Physical losses begin to edge gains. Even a healthy diet, exercise, and plenty of rest can't prevent it from happening. At first the changes are small, almost imperceptible. With each passing year the pace quickens. No part of your body is exempt; from your muscles to your teeth, from your joints to your organs, from your eyes to your skin, and don't forget your mind; that weakens and deteriorates too. (Your saying, "Thanks Pastor. That's just what I'm eager to hear.")

Tonight is Ash Wednesday. The black crosses on our foreheads bear witness that we are dust and to dust we shall return. The physical decline that occurs in our bodies over the years is an unwelcome reminder of our own mortality. The weakening of our body leads finally to death. If that's not enough of a downer, take a look around you. The negative effect of sin permeates everything around us. St. Paul describes how sin ruins not just the body. Sin's destruction is seen in behavior. "Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing." What an ugly picture. Its reason to make anyone discouraged. If it's not your health, then it's the health of a loved one. If it's not boredom, it's overwork. If it's not loss of income, it's loss of your reputation when someone maligns you with malicious rumors. If it's not rulers that plunge our country into war, then it's rulers who call good what God calls evil. If it's not others refusing to forgive you, then it's you refusing to forgive others. It's always something. Sin always lies so close at hand in others and in you and me. Sin confounds everything and everybody. You are dust and to dust you shall return.

Exactly what trouble the people of God were experiencing or how it was dragging them down when St. Peter wrote to them, we don't know. He notes, "you have been distressed by various trials". We share in common with them that our trials are "varied". They come in so many forms. The duration or intensity of any trial is beyond our knowing. Like those first century Christians we too struggle with getting down, losing hope. Without hope there is no energy, no strength. Consider what fans of a professional football team do when their team is losing by a huge margin near the end of the game. They start heading for the exit. They give up before the game is over when it looks hopeless. Players give up too. Peter writes to people who are down, vexed and discouraged by various trials that are taking their toll, Christians who feel like quitting. By inspiration of the Holy Spirit Peter's words are meant for you and me.

Your faith in Jesus is the key to not just endure trials but to thrive. “and though you have not seen Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory.” We easily respond with cynicism to such a positive message; yeah right! “Greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory?” ‘Be for real.’ Here’s the thing. Peter is for real. His exhortation to rejoice greatly is not an empty platitude. His encouragement to experience joy inexpressible is not mere hype. He means it. Here’s why.

The curse of sin is meant to lead us to Jesus Christ for relief from sin’s destructive power. In the Garden of Eden God’s judgment for sin was followed immediately by His solution to the curse. “The seed of the woman shall crush the serpent’s head.” The first Gospel promise was spoken right on the heels of the curse. Consider St. Paul’s words to the Romans. “For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” The curse of sin is pervasive. It affects everything in our world. Everyone dies...for a reason! There is ONE and only ONE escape! Through Jesus the curse is taken away. Death for every believer is the doorway to a new life, in a new place, with a renewed body. The book of Hebrews states, “For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come.” Your real and permanent home is not here. Your true home is the place that God has prepared for you to live eternally. It’s when your life here on earth becomes your lone focus that you become cynical, discouraged, hopeless. When you fixate on all the trouble in the world and your own personal trouble, that’s when you feel like giving up. Fix your eyes instead upon Jesus. Pay attention to His promises. Be renewed by His forgiveness and love.

Mr. Armstrong says, “You can’t argue with time.” He’s right of course; but he’s only telling half the story. Yes, because you can’t argue with time you keep wearing down...till you’re dead. That focuses only on the curse and its destructive impact. Woe is me! For Good News you have to look elsewhere. Look to Jesus. The ashes tonight and the words “you are dust and to dust you shall return”, the darkness that covered the earth on Good Friday... that message speaks of sin and the curse. God’s story and your story doesn’t end with the curse of sin. Jesus crushed the curse. He chewed up death and spit it out. It’s His resurrection from the grave and returning to His home in heaven that is the awesome conclusion. Your story has a similar, hopeful ending. That you are dust and to dust you shall return isn’t the last word. The last word God has for you is this: “Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” God’s last word is not, “the wages of sin is death” His last word is “but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” God’s last Word is not, “You can’t argue with time” (you’re going to die). His last Word is, “I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am there you may be also.” His last word is not death, it’s life. His last word is not the curse. His last Word is Jesus. You are dust and from the dust you shall be raised to live in your eternal home. Thanks be to God. Amen.