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Sermon Title: Ash Wednesday
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." '

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the Devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." '

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." '

Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." ' When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

A visit to the doctor. For much of our lives a doctor visit is fairly straightforward. Almost every ache and pain we have is fixable, explainable, no problem. Every sniffle, broken knee, stomach virus, sprained muscle, every cavity—they all go away.

Then there's that point in life, somewhere around 40, when every doctor visit, every dentist visit, every medical question you have is answered with "Well, you *are* getting older. That comes with aging. No, it's not going away. No, it's not coming back."

All of a sudden we realize we are mortal, we are finite, we have an expiration date, as if "Use by . . ." is stamped on our foreheads. It is a wake-up call, an unwelcome wake-up call: no more immortality.

I can remember as a young man, right into my late 20s, I never worried about running on highways or busy roads. You see, I was certain if a car came at me, I could time it just right, and I could push off any vehicle that came at me, roll over just so, land on my feet, keep on going. Youth is like that. We are invincible. Then, suddenly, I have two artificial knees. One day we are mere mortals.

Which brings me to Ash Wednesday. *Ash Wednesday*. Do you realize there are no Ash Wednesday hymns? We sing about Jesus's death, but we don't sing about our own. And the hymns we have about death, most of them are euphemistic, almost pleasant. And what about Ash Wednesday Bible verses? Not many. The most obvious one says, "From dust you come, to dust you shall return" (Ecclesiastes 3:20), the idea that in the book of Genesis it says God created Adam from the dust of the earth, the dirt. We come from the ground, and when it's all over, we get lowered back into the ground.

That was before the days of vaults, aboveground burials, mausoleums, cremations, lots of ways, of alternatives to "earth to earth, dust to dust." But ultimately, the same idea. This life ends. This life we love, we treasure, we enjoy—this life ends.

I realized that it's been years since we actually explained Ash Wednesday and Lent. What is it? Why do it? Ash Wednesday kicks off Lent, and Lent is the 40 days from now till Easter. It's not actually 40 days. When Christianity was getting itself organized centuries ago, they didn't count Sundays, so Lent is 40 days from Ash Wednesday to Easter, but not counting Sundays.

The "40" comes from Jesus's experience in the wilderness when he was tempted by the Devil. When Jesus was 30 years old, he decided to begin his ministry. The first thing he did was go to his cousin John the Baptist and get baptized. Then, before his public ministry, he went into the wilderness to think, to clear his head, to gain a perspective, insight.

Lots of cultures do something similar. Native Americans have a "vision quest." It's the same idea. You go off by yourself, you fast, you control your thoughts and ideas and desires, you focus . . . until God gives you a "vision," a sort of "blueprint" for the rest of your life. So, Jesus went into the wilderness, fasted for 40 days, opening himself up to thoughts and ideas, dreams and visions, even voices.

My longest fast was for five days. Nothing but water for five days. And, trust me, you start to see things and hear things in ways you never did before. Everything about you is heightened, sensitized. And Jesus did that for 40 days! At that point, the Devil shows up and confronts Jesus with temptations: food, power, ego, thrills. The Devil even offers Jesus the easy way out. Remember, Jesus had come to save the world, and the Devil offers it to him, the whole world on a silver platter: no cross, no death, no sacrifice. But Jesus rejects each temptation, instead embracing the "no pain, no gain" idea of sacrifice.

That's what gives us the idea of giving up something for Lent. In effect, Jesus had his own Lent, his own 40 days of sacrifice. He gave up food and pleasure and all the distractions of life in order to prepare himself for the ultimate sacrifice, giving up himself, sacrificing himself for the whole world. That sacrifice was Jesus's willing death on the cross, the prelude to Easter, to resurrection, to eternal life and heaven, the joyful, logical, happy ending to Lent. But, let's face it, the road to heaven takes us right through death.

Most good things in life are the result of contrast. A good meal doesn't come right after a great meal. It comes after no meal, a time of not eating. We're always told the most important meal of the day is your first one, what you have early in the morning. It's our "break-fast" meal, *break-fast*, breakfast. Lunch, heck, that's maybe four hours later. But breakfast is enjoyed for the contrast with not eating.

A good vacation rarely comes right after a great vacation. We love it in part because we have *not* been relaxing, slowing down, vacationing. We've been working hard, immersed in a stringent daily routine that is exacting, demanding, exhausting. Then, vacation comes, and it's exhilarating.

Well, for Christianity, Easter comes after Good Friday, resurrection comes after crucifixion, eternal life comes after death, heaven comes after the grave. I'm not trying to depress you or be crass; I'm just telling it as it is: Lent ends happily with Easter. Lilies. Trumpets. Packed church at three services. A tent for the overflow crowd. Lots of Easter clothes, even some Easter bonnets, and powerful, upbeat music.

But Lent begins tonight: a small crowd, ashes smudged on your forehead, slow, mournful music, and me, talking about sacrifice and death. And that's not popular. We don't like that stuff.

This weekend is Presidents Day, a happy, patriotic holiday, Washington and Lincoln's birthdays. We don't celebrate "Lincoln's Assassination Day," we don't celebrate "Nathan Hale's Hanging Day." We don't even celebrate the "Dying of Natural Causes Day" for great Americans. Who wants to think

about any of that? Maybe it's a wonder anybody's in Church on Ash Wednesday.

But here we are, embracing our mortality, embracing the contrast that comes when the death of this life becomes the life of eternal life. On Sunday, half of America watched the Super Bowl. One hundred men at the top of their games, the pinnacle of their profession, the best of the best.

They got there by sacrifice. Each one of them, they've probably been playing since they were 5 or 6 years old. The kids who wouldn't hit the weight room or run extra sprints, they weren't there. The kids who were late for practice, who skipped practice, they weren't there. The kids who wouldn't ask for help, who wouldn't listen, they weren't there. The kids who partied too hard, who took the easy way out, who gave in to every temptation, they weren't there. At the end, at the Super Bowl, the ones we saw had made sacrifices.

Look at the three big stars. Peyton Manning, the Denver quarterback, broke his neck, his *neck*, a few years ago. And made it back to the Super Bowl. Can we even imagine the sacrifice that took?

Cam Newton, the Carolina quarterback, this year's Pro Football MVP, he started his college career getting kicked out of college for stealing. Then, just a couple of years ago, he broke his back in a horrific car accident. *Broke his back!* But he made it all the way back to the Super Bowl, humbling himself, learning from his mistakes, growing up, and sacrificing a lot.

And Von Miller, the Super Bowl hero and MVP. Just three years ago, he was suspended from pro football for drugs. But he made some changes. He gave up some behaviors. He sought forgiveness, He sacrificed. He sacrificed all the way to the top. And the first thing he did after the Super Bowl was to thank God.

That's the promise of Lent, that begins with Ash Wednesday that ends with Easter; that starts with talk of ash and death, that finishes with talk of spring and life.