Ash Wednesday
Rolling Meadows -- 1981

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IN NOMINE JESU

Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7

ASH WEDNESDAY is the great reminder that we are all mortal -- "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust" -- or as I learned it: "From the dust wast thou taken, and to the dust shalt tho return." Our Lenten Series this year is entitled, "The Tree of Life -- the Tree of Death" -- as you can see so graphically pictured on your bulletin. (thanks to Jim Palluck) And in actuality, that is the polarity of our existence -- "Life and Death." ..... If you keep coming to this Lenten Series, I hope you will begin to understand how this whole thing is finally reversed -- that what we think is the "Tree of Life" is really the "Tree of Death" -- and the "Barren Tree of the Cross" is really the "Tree of Life." I know it is absurd and up-side-down -- but that's the way it is in God's economy!

In a very graphic and picturesque way our text describes the solitary Figure of GOD HIMSELF -- standing in the midst of a barren wasteland. In the verses before we are told that the "LORD GOD CAUSED A MIST TO GO UP FROM THE EARTH AND WATER THE WHOLE FACE OF THE GROUND." Then He stoops down -- picks up some clay -- kneads it -- and molds i -- slowly, carefully -- like a Sculptor! Then He breathes into that piece of Clay -- that "Adam" -- that "humanity" -- His Own Breath, "THE BREATH OF LIFE" ---- and that CLOD OF CLAY becomes a "LIVING BEING."

Now there are TWO FIGURES -- God and Man -- side by side -- both standing in the wilderness. .... And God then transforms the wilderness into a magnificent estate --

with trees and flowers and running streams that flow out of the Garden to give LIFE t the whole world. Everything necessary for sustenance and pleasure is in abundance. And God takes "ADAM" -- and the Hebrew here is really "humanity, mankind" -- in other words, we are ALL INVOLVED simply because we belong to the HUMAN RACE ---- and He puts "Adam" into the "Garden" to tend and care for it. ..... It is all there for his use and enjoyment. .... There is only ONE TREE that is forbidden to him --- and that is the "TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL."

But God does not stop there! He sees that the MAN is "LONELY" -- he is not complete. So He sets out to fashion a "HELPER FIT FOR HIM." .... He takes "more clay" and fashio the animals and the birds and He brings them to the man. Adam names them all -- but still there is "not a helper fit for him." So God causes a the man to fall into a "Deep Sleep" -- takes "one of his ribs" -- and creates a "woman." And when the Man XX XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX awakes he cries out joyfully: "THIS AT LAST IS BONE OF MY BONE AND FLESH OF MY FLESH." Adam is now complete -- "Male and Female" -- both in the IMAGE OF GOD. .... And "THEY ARE BOTH NAKED AND NOT ASHAMED."

Notice the HARMONY. That is what the world is meant to be! There is a HARMONY betwee God and His people -- between man and woman -- between humanity and nature! .... All of God's Good Creation is given for us to enjoy --- except for the ONE TREE -- the "TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL."

Now the "serpent" appears -- and with his appearance begins the story of our struggle with temptation and evil. The "serpent" begins by appearing to be primarily interest in the "rules" that have been laid down by God. He does not question God's Authority or His existence. He just asks the woman a question: "Is my understanding correct? Did God really say that you could not eat of any of the trees of the garden?" It seem like an innocent question -- and most important it gives the woman a chance to DEFEND GOD! She replies: "WE MAY INDEED EAT OF THE TREES OF THE GARDEN. THERE IS JUST ONE TREE IN THE MIDST OF THE GARDEN ABOUT WHICH GOD SAID 'YOU SHALL NOT EAT OF IT OR TOUCH IT LEST YOU DIE.'"

The Serpent now comes right out into the open and accuses God of not speaking the truth. "YOU SHALL NOT DIE" ..... "You must have not heard correctly -- or else God is deliverately holding something back from hou..... Perhaps He knows that if you do eat this fruit you will be like God -- knowing everything -- and He doesn't want that to happen." The implication is that God is deliberately holding back a part of His Blessing. In other words, "Don't believe Him."

The point is: If God is indeed "holding something back" and if it is indeed "possible to be like Him" ---- then why should we remain "DEPENDENT" when we are "independent?" Why be subjects -- if we are kings and queens? Why not no restrictions -- no taboos?

LENT is a perios of SELF-DENIAL. And it really doesn't matter whether the "Serpent" is right or wrong -- or whether the "prohibition of God" has been broken! ..... What matters is that we see ourselves under the "TREE OF THE CROSS" -- that in spite of everything that is going on in your life and in my life -- in spite of all the judgment, and prohibition and deprivation -- in spite of all the phony branches we are sometimes asked to hold on to -- no matter "how beautiful to the eyes" -- no matter "how good it looks" -- no matter "how much we try to convince ourselvese it it do us no harm" -- "no matter "how much we want to be LIKE GOD" ------ w e cannot -- we are "DUST AND ASHES." ..... And until we realize and remember that --- there will be no RESURRECTION REALITY! Amen.