

ASH WEDNESDAY + + +

| SETH FLICK

I want to begin tonight's message with a song, so I hope not to offend all of you, not with the song itself, but with my ability to sing. But if you know this song, I would love for you to sing it along with me. Ring around the rosy, pocket full of posies, ashes, ashes, we all fall down. All right. So I was told that they don't teach nursery rhymes in school anymore, but it seems like you all did a really good job.

But here's what's great about starting with a song that we all know, is that we all know the words, but I would say that not all of us know the meaning to those words. Now it's a little bit historically contested, so some people do not believe this is connected and some people do, but as it stands, this is supposedly a children's song that was sung by like little kindergartners that actually has its roots in the bubonic plague, the Black Death.

It was this plague that like ravaged in 1656 through London. In fact, like if you got this plague, there was a one in four chance that you would die. And that's only if it was the bubonic plague, because once it went from bubonic inside of your lymph nodes to pneumonic, which is affecting your lungs, the mortality rate skyrocketed. Can you imagine you walked through a populous city like Victorian England and one out of every four people you saw would die as a result of this disease?

Now interestingly enough about this disease, it would start internally and you wouldn't quite know you had it because in all likelihood it came from fleas, from rats. Those fleas would bite your legs because you didn't have proper footwear at the time when you're walking around the house, walking through your neighborhood. But eventually the curse, the sickness that was internal would start to have external signs and that's where the ring around the rosy comes from.

Because you start to develop these little red circles on your body that would illustrate that something worse is coming. And then that little red circle would become so inflamed and necrotic that the tissue would turn what? Black. And that's why it was called the black plague. And this is what little kindergartners are singing about. And I want you to think about that. That something significantly wrong had infected the body and there was a marker on the outside externally that people could see. So ring around the rosy.

The pocket full of posies supposedly was dried herbs and flowers, particularly like posies that people would carry around in their pockets because as they walked around the city of London, the stench of dead bodies was so pungent that they would have to smell these herbs as they were walking along so that it wouldn't be as vomit inducing. So ring around the rosy, pocket full of posies, ashes, ashes, which is most likely due to the crematoriums working. We all fall down.

It kind of makes you think a little bit more about singing songs like that, but it also makes you really think like death is something that we encounter at funerals or so we think. But you and I know that every cell that we have in our body is breaking down for every moment that we continue to live. And that's because we have a curse inside of us.

And it isn't just like some kind of bubonic plague or something like that that can ravage the world. No, we have a different curse that's even worse. And so we need to get to the bottom of this because this is Ash Wednesday. Many of the times in Christendom, we are able to celebrate and we can have this wonderful joy and we can praise Jesus. But brothers and sisters in Jesus, every once in a while, we have got to sit in ashes and sackcloth and we have to feel what repentance feels like because of the weight of sin and death is real.

And all you have to do is live long enough to bury someone you care about, to see your child be put in a coffin smaller than this. And I have officiated not over my own child, but I had to bury a baby who had a coffin that was this big because his mother was overdosed. Because there is a real curse that has infected everybody here. And that curse leads to something far worse than a sickness in the body because that curse leads to everyone in death because we all fall down.

And this isn't new. I mean, let's look at the text. Let's look at what God's word has to say. And this is very early on in God's word. In Genesis chapter three, you've read this part already. This was a part of the responsive reading at the beginning of the service.

The Lord spoke earlier to Adam and to Eve, particularly to Eve, and she said, like, you can eat of any of the trees that are here, just you may not eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. If you do that, you will surely die. But then the serpent, the crafty one, the tempter comes up to her and says, did God really say that? Like, is that really what's going to happen? Is it really going to be that bad? Well, they ate of it and found out.

So the Lord then visited Adam and Eve. They tried to cover their own tracks. They tried to cover the markers that they had fallen. All of a sudden, everybody recognized that they were naked. And by everybody, I mean, Adam and Eve, that they were naked and ashamed of being naked. And all of a sudden, like they had marker on their body where they looked at the other body and there was shame there. Adam looked at Eve's body and there was shame there. And they had markers on their body that something was wrong internally, and it could be observed externally, somehow, I don't know how that worked.

But then the Lord begins to speak with them. And to the woman, he says, I will make your pains in childbearing very severe. And with painful labor, you're going to give birth to children. Your desire, which by the way, used to be for the Lord, will now be for your husband. And he's going to rule over you.

And then to Adam, like he's not just getting after Eve, he changes his focus and speaks to Adam. He says, because you listened to your wife, God bless you, and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, you must not eat from it. Congregation, I want you to read this one word with me, cursed is the ground because of you.

So like, it's not just an issue with the body. Now we have an issue with the whole world. The earth is now subject to the futility of this curse because of you, Adam and Eve. Through painful toil, you're going to eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you. It used to produce blessing and nourishment and nurturing. But now the only way that that's going to come is if it's mixed with thorns and thistles and you'll eat of the plants of the field.

And the weight like of the curse begins to get heavier and heavier. Because then he says, by the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food until you return to the ground. Since from it you were taken and congregation for dust you are and to dust you shall return.

So in the first verse of that curse in verse 16, we hear that there is going to be pain and childbearing. So yes, there will be pain when the child is delivered, but that pain is not just going to end with the delivery. There's going to be pain between the parent and the child as a result of the child having that curse.

There's going to be observed in verse 16, conflict in the marriage where they both should be living to glorify God. Now they're going to be focused on each other. And so the family then and the earth, all of this starts to interact with the curse. And we've got Adam and we've got Eve and they got the curse. The congregation say they got the curse.

All right, wouldn't that be wonderful if we could push that curse away and just say it was only with Adam and Eve. But as you and I read through the rest of the text of Genesis, all we find is futile efforts at humans trying to solve their sin problem. And humans trying to move the curse and shift it off of them as they're shifting blame on somebody else.

That's actually what happens in the garden, right? The Lord comes to Adam and says, what have you done? And Adam is like, nah, she did it. And you look and see that that's the way that Genesis works. It's all of this blame shifting and self-justification of like, oh, the curse isn't as bad with me but you should see the other guy. It's really bad over there.

And you see humanity then starts to absorb and react within this curse. And wouldn't that be wonderful if the curse just ended in the story of Genesis? And wouldn't it be great if we could just push that away and we wouldn't have to worry about the futility of the ground and the thorns and the thistles of living in this earth? And wouldn't it be wonderful if our marriages and our families and our relationship with our kids were also filled with thorns and thistles?

And yet it is. So we can't just say they got the curse. Congregation, now we got to say we got the curse. So we got the curse. And not only that, but we can look all throughout the Old and the New Testament and we can say, oh man, what a bunch of morons who lived so long ago. This has nothing to do with me and you.

Except we do the exact same blame shifting, self-justifying actions that everybody else in the scripture has done. And whatever it is that they did, we just added more on top of it. There's more weight of sin that has collected around the world. And so yes, they got the curse, we got the curse, but now we made the curse worse.

So I want to hear you say, we make the curse worse. They got the curse, we got the curse, and we didn't do anything good. We made the curse worse. And we don't just make it worse, we multiply it in the way that we hurt each other. Think about the stories that you know in the families that surround you.

Abuse, neglect of the kids we're called to take care of. That's not just childbearing pain. That's the pain that we're causing. Toilsome work. We looked at the injustice in the world lately and the exploitation. Do you know how much human trafficking just took place over the Superbowl weekend? Did you know that the finances that it would take to purchase every NFL team is in the billions?

But if you added up how much human traffickers make in one year, they could purchase every single NFL team right now in one year. This is what we contribute to. This is our own selfishness. This is us ravaging the creation that God has given us in greed.

And it's not just like we're sitting by just watching it happen, you know, like, oh, stinks to be all those guys. We're active agents of the curse. Every time we take advantage of somebody else. Every time we objectify someone else that the Lord has made and redeemed. Every time our pride tramples over somebody else's dignity.

That's us being active agents of the same curse from Genesis three. And so that's why these ashes that we're going to be talking about, ashes, ashes, we all fall down. Ashes that we have come from and ashes we shall return. This is much like that rosy circle that starts in the plague. It's a visible mark of death. That's marked everybody.

But we're not here tonight just to hear about a visible marker of death. That's here to take everybody out. You know, I was in my own personal devotions a couple of months ago and I knew that I'd have the opportunity to preach this message and I could not pass up the text that I came across.

I was reading through Ezekiel and I didn't think I'd get anything in Ezekiel at that time for Ash Wednesday. That's not why I was reading. I was just reading it because I needed time with the Lord. And as I'm reading it, I'm reading through a story of a whole bunch of people who are doing everything except for what the Lord has asked them to, who are engaging in the curse and they are bringing in idolatry and their families are falling apart and everything is going wrong.

And the Lord's judgment comes down on them. But I want you to hear this. This is from Ezekiel chapter nine, verses one through four. The Lord in righteous anger then thundered. He said, bring on the men appointed to punish this city. Tell them to bring their weapons with them. This is God in his righteous judgment.

And so six men soon appeared from the upper gate that faces north, each carrying a deadly weapon in his hand. With them was a man dressed in linen who carried a writer's case at his side. So you have six men ready for battle and one man in linen with a pen.

All of them take a trip. They go to the temple courtyard and stood beside the bronze altar. Remember the bronze altar was the place where sacrifices were made and atonement was made and blood was shed. Always pointed to a greater blood, but a blood would be shed there.

Then the glory of God of Israel rose up between the cherubim where it had rested and moved to the entrance of the temple. And the Lord called to the man dressed in linen who was carrying the writer's case. He said to them, walk through the streets of Jerusalem and put a mark on the what? People who weep and sigh because of the detestable sins being committed in their city.

Put a mark on the forehead of everyone who would weep and sigh because of their sins. Put a mark on the forehead of everyone who's repenting of the life and the curse that they used to have. Put a mark on the forehead.

And as I'm reading through this, I'm like, you know, God, you're speaking something I don't get what it is. And you just keep bringing me this word. Mark on the forehead. Mark on the forehead. So I looked it up in the Hebrew. We have to take that as part of our training.

And I found the word and the word was tav. Tav is a Hebrew letter. Put a mark on their forehead. And this is what a tav looks like. In the same script that Ezekiel used. You want to know what a tav looks like? Do you want to know what the mark on their forehead looked like? It's a cross.

Years before Jesus, the mark of mercy, of redemption, of peace, of reconciliation, of moving that curse. It was guess what? A cross, a mark on the forehead of those who repent.

And then I started to see there's more. It's not just in Ezekiel.

In the first, in the first cycle that you read in the book of Revelation, as the Lord's judgment is at hand, this is what he says in Revelation 7, 3, he says, do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put the seal on the what? Foreheads of the servants of our God.

It's a mark of mercy. It's a mark that says that whatever that marker was of plague and curse, you have a different mark that you wear.

And then I started to read some more. And as you get into the third cycle of Revelation, in Revelation 22, verse 4, the Lord says this, they will see his face and his name will be on their foreheads.

And in that view, what you have right after it is this amazing undoing or reversal of the curse. You've got new Jerusalem, a new city, a new garden that has no thorns and no thistles.

You have pictures drawn of families who are reunited from death, ripping them apart, brought back together because there was mercy there and there was markings of mercy for them.

You got husbands and wives that aren't married anymore, but living in a closer intimacy than they've ever had here on earth.

And so like this ring around the rosary mark of death of the curse gets completely undone by the mercy that God had in plain sight throughout the scriptures. As we see Ezekiel through Revelation, to Revelation, to the recreation of all things, it was always one sign. It was always supposed to be one sign. And that sign is the cross.

So yes, they got the curse. And yes, we got the curse. And yes, we made the curse worse, but do you know what the cross does? The cross can reverse the curse, amen church.

And so yes, we take sin seriously because the wages of sin is death. And we are going to experience some really terrible things in between Ezekiel and Revelation.

But someone marked your forehead with a tav, with mercy, and he didn't just like nullify the curse so then it wouldn't affect people going on forward. No one said he reversed it.

Paul says this in Galatians three about the curse. He says, Christ redeemed us from that curse by becoming a curse for us.

For it is written, cursed is everyone who's hung on a tree.

Think about the way that Jesus lived the last moments of his life. And I want you to think about that in comparison to the curse. What was the clothing situation like for Adam and Eve after they were naked and they were ashamed?

Now Jesus wasn't ashamed, but he's up on the cross and he doesn't have any clothes on.

Think about the pain in a relationship that the Lord said would be had between the husband and the wife. And he's got a pain in a relationship as well as all these people that he shared life with abandoned him.

And think about the curse that causes death and eventually we read in the scriptures that both Adam and Eve die and everybody else basically after that. And Christ goes up to the top, up to the cross and he dies too.

He became the curse so he could reverse the curse, but that's what's beautiful and somewhat heartbreaking about Ash Wednesday is yeah, we remember our sins and it's a moment where we say this is reality and this is terrible and we contribute to it, but we do so with weeping and sighing like those in Ezekiel's time.

We do so by availing to the cross that's marked over each and every one of us because what Jesus has done for you.

But the darkness of this ash is always put in a specific shape that is the cross. And that's so that all of us tonight, when we look at the mark that's on our forehead, we don't have to think about a ring around the rosy marker of death and that being the end of the song and that being the end of the story.

No, instead we have a marker that's on our face in the shape of a cross to mark us as those who can receive mercy.

And what a beautiful reversal because it's in that, that we move from ashes to glory from curses to blessing. And you were marked for more because you are now marked to go from death to life. Amen.

Let's conclude with a word of prayer.

Jesus, we are so thankful that even though we can look out after all of these crosses are going to be placed on our forehead and the dark color of that cross is going to remind us of our sins, that through weeping and sighing, your spirit has moved our heart.

That this curse is not the end of our story, but the cross will say the story keeps going.

So Jesus, as we wear this cross around, wherever it is that we go after this, I'll just ask Lord that you would allow this cross in our forehead to be a testimony where we can share with others about your grace and mercy.

And when we wash this off of our foreheads, Lord Jesus, I'll just ask that every one of us would remember our baptism where you have called us as your own.

You have sealed us with your mercy that we don't have to remember the curse, but we can remember the cross.

In your name we pray, amen.