

**CONCORDIA SEMINARY**  
LENTEN SERMON SERIES

*O LOVE*

HOW DEEP, HOW BROAD, HOW HIGH



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SAMPLE

## INTRODUCTORY NOTES

God is “rich in mercy” (Eph 2:4) and “abounding in merciful love” (Ex 34:6). The enormity of God’s mercy drove Saint Paul to his knees, fervently praying that others, too, might “have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:18–19). Such love and mercy stirred the souls of God’s Old Testament people as well, who exulted: “As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him. . . . The steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps 103:11, 17).

At the same time, the Bible teaches that all humanity will face a final judgment before God, and that apart from Jesus Christ there is no escape from the divine wrath that is coming upon the world because of human sin and wickedness. It is often noted that contemporary Western culture rejects this idea that God punishes. In a cultural setting like this, clearly the church must proclaim—and the church must clearly proclaim—the truth about God’s holiness and judgment. Without the preaching of the law, there is no real awareness of the need for and nature of the gospel.

But there is another, perhaps less obvious, challenge. Yes, the world around us casually acknowledges that God is loving and merciful, at least to the extent that God is acknowledged at all. However, we must not assume, regarding the gospel, that it is therefore obvious and easily known. The love of God *in Jesus Christ* is no generic, ordinary kind of love. The mercy of God for sinners *in Jesus Christ* is no everybody-knows-that kind of mercy.

## OVERARCHING GOALS

This Lenten sermon series sets out to trace the enormous dimensions God’s merciful love for sinners in Christ. The primary goal is that hearers may more fully comprehend and rejoice in “the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.” A second goal is that hearers would come to associate each of the many dimensions of God’s great love and mercy elaborated in this series with the suffering and death of Christ, enriching their Lenten meditation and their ongoing understanding of the cross. A third goal is that God’s enormous love for the hearers would move them to live in love and mercy toward others.

## HYMNS AND LITURGY

Vespers, Evening Prayer, or Service of Prayer and Preaching would be a good option for these mid-week services. No distinct liturgies or litanies have been developed for this Lenten series, but for each sermon, a number of hymn suggestions are provided. The first three Lenten mid-week sermons following Ash Wednesday give attention to Luther's catechetical explanations of the three articles of the Apostles' Creed, respectively, so I would recommend incorporating a congregational recitation of Luther's explanations in those services. Finally, if it is the congregation's tradition to include within its Lenten services a sequenced reading of the Passion Narrative (from one Gospel or from a harmony of the Gospels), this would also be appropriate and well fitted to the sermons in this series, although the sermons are not written with any particular sequence of Passion Narrative excerpts in mind.

The title of this sermon series is borrowed from the hymn, "O Love, How Deep, How Broad, How High" (*LSB* 544). Among the suggested hymns throughout this sermon series, *LSB* 544 is suggested for most but not all of the services, giving the congregation a chance to learn and grow into this sturdy hymn without overusing it across the nine services. This hymn is attributed in *LSB* to Thomas à Kempis, although the *Lutheran Service Book: Companion to the Hymns* suggests that evidence for his authorship is scant and concludes that it is "an anonymous hymn from the *Devotio moderna* movement" originating in northern Germany or the Netherlands in the fifteenth century (1551-1552). Luther praised this Latin hymn and urged that it be retained, along with several others, because "they truly please us from the heart" (AE 34:57).

Striking features of this hymn are its strong grounding in the incarnate life and saving work of Christ and its repeated prefacing of lines with "for us. . ." both crucial elements of strong gospel proclamation. The opening stanza marvels at how deep, broad, and high is God's love for us in Christ, and the closing Trinitarian stanza returns to this language of the dimensions of God's love. Throughout the hymn, there is a tone of wonder, confession, and doxology.

The English translation of this hymn in *LSB* is a slight updating of the work of Benjamin Webb (1855). In English translation, the hymn is traditionally set to the tune Agincourt, a tune which dates back at least to the fifteenth century. This tune was previously familiar to English ears, being associated with a several-stanza song celebrating the victory of King Henry V over the French at the Battle of Agincourt. The tune conveys regal grandeur and warm, popular gratitude. It is therefore a fitting match for the wonder and doxology of the Christian hymn verses praising God for his love and ultimate victory—for us—in Christ!

# SERMON 1 – ASH WEDNESDAY

*“HIGH LOVE, DOWN IN THE DUST”*

*Text: Genesis 2:7-9; 3:17-24*

In the name of Jesus, who with a love as high as the heavens, reaches down to find us, even in the dust. Amen.

Dust and ashes. Today is Ash Wednesday, that day in the church year when many Christians around the world are marked with ashes on their foreheads, as their pastor or priest looks them in the eye and declares, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Dust and ashes.

Today we begin the church’s holy season of Lent. Lent is a time for reflecting on our own brokenness. Lent is a time for repenting of our sin against others and against God. Lent is a time for meditating on the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, and for beholding in Jesus, just how much God loves us.

During this year’s Lenten season, our sermons will be exploring the theme of God’s enormous love. The hugeness of his mercy and his compassion. In the Old Testament, when God personally passed by before Moses on the mountain, he proclaimed his divine name: “Yahweh, Yahweh, a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in merciful love” [Ex 34:6]. In the Psalms, the Old Testament worshippers exulted: “As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love for those who fear him” [Ps 103:11]. And in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul marvels that although we and all mankind were “dead in trespasses and sins,” there is hope, because, Paul writes, God is “rich in mercy” [Eph 2:4]. The enormity of God’s love and mercy drove Paul to his knees in prayer, fervently asking that others, too, “might have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” [Eph 3:18-19].

And that is my prayer for us, this Lenten season, and that will be the focus of our Lenten sermons. We will examine from several angles just how rich, how huge, how deep, how broad, how high, God’s love for us is, in Jesus Christ. It has become a cliché, perhaps, an empty-sounding, bumper-sticker slogan. God loves you. Jesus loves you. But there is nothing empty or clichéd about the living God, and the ways that he has loved us and continues to love us and will love us forever.

Today we reflect on God’s high love that reaches down into the dust, literally, to have us and to help us. The Scripture text for this Ash Wednesday sermon comes from the account of the creation and fall of our first parents in the garden of Eden, recorded in Genesis 2 and 3. Let me read the key section from each of those chapters:

Then the Lord God *formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life*, and the man became a living creature. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

But after Adam and Eve sin against God by disobeying his commands, God pronounces punishment upon the serpent and the woman and then turns to the man:

To Adam [the Lord God] said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ *cursed is the ground because of you*; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, *till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*”

The man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them. Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—” therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden *to work the ground from which he was taken*. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

So, from handfuls of dust and dirt, God made a living human being, created in the image of God. He took dust, and he breathed into it the breath of life, and that dust became a human, and blinked his eyes and opened his mouth in wonder and praise. But because of human rebellion and sin, because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve and you and me, God’s decree is that Adam and every other human must die. We must return to the dust and the dirt from which God first formed us.

Every one of us will die, must die, unless Jesus returns first. Every one of us will return to dust—or ashes, for those who are cremated. Every one of us must return to the ground. It is a vital truth, a central truth of our world and of our human race. It’s uncontroversial. It’s pretty self-evident. And yet how rare it is to be directly told, “You are dust, and to dust you will return.” Ash Wednesday is sobering. It’s sobering for parents to see the ashes traced on the foreheads of their children, and to hear those words addressed to them, individually: “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” But it is true, true for every one of us.

This dose of reality summons us to repentance and to joy. *To joy*, because as a Christian, I know Jesus Christ [preacher can point to or trace the shape of the cross on his forehead], the mighty Savior who has won for me resurrection and eternal life. But these blunt words

and these ashes also summon me *to repentance*. My sin grieves my God. My sin has brought wretchedness and death into God's creation, into my life, and into the lives of others.

Dust and ashes. Throughout the Bible, dust and ashes are associated with repentance. Job repented in dust and ashes. The stragglers left after Jerusalem was destroyed, sat down on the ground and poured dust on their heads. After listening to Jonah, the king of Nineveh sat down in a pile of ashes. Dust and ashes convey repentance, humility, and mourning over sin.

Why dust? Why ashes? What is dust? What are ashes? Dust and ashes are the stuff of utter destruction, nothingness, and worthlessness. All that stood, all that was built up, all that was seemingly strong and secure and even magnificent, is torn down, burned down, destroyed, undone. Think of the mushrooming cloud of dust and ashes from an atomic bomb. Whatever was in its path is now dust and ash. Think of the billowing waves of dust and ash from the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Or the dusty rubble and ashes of Jerusalem's charred ruins, when God sent the armies of Babylon against it. Thus it is with cities and buildings, finally, sooner or later. And what of the millions of human beings who have preceded us in this world? Where are they now; what has become of them? Kings and queens, butlers and beggars—all of them? They are dust and ashes.

In the Old Testament, God called cities and nations to repent, and to turn to the Lord for mercy. His prophets warned them.

Isaiah declared: "The high fortifications of his walls [God] will bring down, lay low, and cast to the ground, to the dust" [Is 25:19].

And again he writes: "You will be brought low; from the dust of the earth you shall speak, and from the dust your speech will be bowed down; your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost, and from the dust your speech shall whisper" [Is 29:5].

Men had defied God, turned away from God, oppressed others, and exalted themselves. They refused to acknowledge their sin, to humble themselves, and to seek God's mercy and help. And so God declared their end: dust and ashes. He warned them and he threatened them (no empty threat!). It was much like the sentence pronounced on Adam: "You are dust, and to dust you will return." This is God's sober sentence pronounced to us, today: "You are dust, and to dust you will return."

But notice this also, dear friends in Christ. The sober reminder quoted to you on Ash Wednesday is not the full verse from Genesis. Recall what God said to Adam just before this: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, *for out of it you were taken*; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

It is true that because of sin, you and I must return to dust. But there is a God who reaches down into dust and gives life to men. Behold the high, high love of God, reaching down in the dirt on the sixth day of the creation. Behold God's heart, beating with excitement and joy, as he formed our first father. Adam had nothing, was nothing, deserved nothing—he was just dirt. But God's love made him, breathed into him, raised him up from the dust to live under God, to know God, to enjoy God, just as God enjoyed Adam and Eve. And he gave them every good thing, and every thing for their good.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you are dust, and you will return to the dust. But remember that long ago, at the beginning, God took us from the ground, raised us up from the dust, enlivened us with his divine breath and love. He is still this God for you. He helps his people in any low and desperate situation. He is the God who heard Hannah's prayer for a child, and she rejoiced:

“There is none holy like the Lord:  
for there is none besides you . . .  
He raises up the poor from the dust;  
he lifts the needy from the ash heap” [2 Sm 2:8].

You are dust, and you will return to the dust, but God's high love will preserve you forever. God will one day reach down into the dust again, into your grave, into your dust, and he will raise your body up again. In love, God will give shape to your dust. In love, he will breathe into your lifeless corpse the breath of life. In love, he will reach down and draw you up to share in the joy of Jesus's own resurrection

We who are dust will share in Jesus's glory and life, all because Jesus set aside his glory and laid down his life, to share in our dust and our death. The one who created us from the dust in love, was himself crucified and buried because of hate. The one who created us from the dust in love, staggered and fell into the dust, pressed down under the weight of the cross that he carried. The one who created us from the dust in love, hung on that cross in pain and shame and nakedness, covered only in dust and blood. The one who created us from the dust in love, poured out his blood for those who would not know him, and his blood ran down his face, his arms, his sides, his legs, and dripped down into the dust below. And from that dust, his blood cries out. From that dust, his blood speaks out in love, “Father, forgive them, pardon them, restore them, resurrect them, for I have shed my blood for the forgiveness of their sins.”

Dear friends, God *loves* you. God's love for you is so high that he reaches down into the dust to have you, and to help you. Back in the first week of the world, when God scooped up that dirt, he looked ahead to the resurrection. As God scooped up that dirt to form Adam, he knew that the day would come when he would do this for Adam again, for all his children, for you. As God scooped up that dirt to form Adam, he also knew what it would cost, the lifeblood of the divine Son. Behold his great love for you, even then. And so the Father bent

down, and the Son at his side, creating with him, reaching down into the dirt so that he might have you, so that he might help you, so that he might love you.

May he grant to you true repentance and full joy in his love, this Lent. May he give you confidence, come what may, that his high love will lift up from the ash heap, and one day raise you from the dust.

“For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him . . .  
As a father shows compassion to his children,  
so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.  
For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust” [Ps 103:11, 13-14].

Amen.

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