

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

At times life can be troubling; very troubling indeed. Before our very eyes, we see marriages disintegrate – ours or someone else's. Before our very eyes, we watch as that always-so-very-strong person in our lives become weak and fragile with illness. Before our very eyes, we watch as loved ones breathe their last and succumb to the power of death. Before our very eyes, we watch as time slips between our fingers, jobs and security seem to evaporate, children take paths we know will cause them pain. It can be enough to bury us in our own poisonous, toxic thoughts of blame, regret, shame self-doubt or self-loathing. Few people are spared these times in our lives; the burden of sin – ours and that of others – lays a fairly uniform layer of dust and ashes at everyone's feet. Most of our emotional immune systems have a fairly strong component of plain old denial. Daily coping mechanisms like these serve us well, since they keep us functioning and prevent us from descending into complete paralysis.

Sometimes the layers of dust and ashes become too thick and vexing to simply ignore. When those times occur people use their own unique coping mechanism. Sara, for example, looks at maps; because looking at a map your life, your location is only one small speck on the state map, likely too insignificant to register on a national map, highly unlikely to be noted on a globe, and should all that fail, completely insignificant on the scale of the solar system, or astral charts.

I for my part find that the grocery store is a good tonic for my moments when my normal coping mechanisms buckle under an excess load of dust and ashes. Watching people anonymously go about their

daily shopping reminds me that whatever happens to be perplexing me at the moment doesn't seem to be affecting the world in general; people's lives, routines, meal plans continue despite my momentary affliction, and on a different day – a better day – I am that anonymous shopper. The world continues to be supplied with an abundance of good things; I find that reassuring.

Some people call a loved one to be reminded that there are people out there who will stand by them no matter how difficult things get. Some people throw themselves into a project to remind themselves that they are capable of accomplishing things.

All of these tactics boil down to unique ways of gaining perspective on our lives. A therapeutic name for this is reframing, and it can be immensely helpful.

Our reading from Deuteronomy this morning is spoken to Israelite farmers, who are instructed to recite the story of God's great actions and deliverance on behalf the people of Israel – the children of Abraham. The growth and harvest of Israel's farmers needed to be seen in light of the greater story of God's care and concern for Israel – even before she was a nation or a people, just a single wandering Aramean. Telling the past story, shapes the present activity. It was a prelude to the dedication of the first fruits, reminding them that their lives are bigger than the momentary abundance or scarcity.

When I was in Texas in January, I saw row upon row of unpicked, ruined cotton because the soil was too wet from the flood waters earlier in the year to get the equipment out in the field. Texas black gold soil has a high clay content; walking through a wet field just a few feet your feet weigh

about 5 pounds each. Imagine a cotton picker sinking down in that.

How can that farmer drive by that field of ruined cotton day after day? She reminds herself that there have and will be other good years, and will be more to come. Farmers retell the stories of other bad years, as a way of reminding themselves that they have come through it in the, or that God has brought them through in the past. It helps to see their life and work within the greater story of God's love, even goodness, which is why religious faith is strong in agricultural communities.

Most people don't know this about him, but Martin Luther for all his accomplishments, immense collection of writings, theological epiphanies, considered himself cursed to the point where he didn't think it fair to share his life with a wife. For all his work and breakthroughs he carried the burden of believing that the blood of a hundred thousand peasants stained his hand, felt that he attracted conflict and dissention.

Despite his intentions to bring meaningful change to Christ's Church, on many days he was convinced that his work brought great harm to the Church. The dust and ashes in Luther's life built up so deep that he could neither ignore them nor address them, and so he did the only thing he could – cast himself upon the mercy of Jesus Christ as his only help. Looking at Jesus, listening to His teachings and His promises, reminding himself and the devil that he was baptized once and for all, seeking to live out of that new existence, and following the clear path of the cross of Christ allowed him to order his life under obedience to Jesus when nothing but disorder and disagreement surrounded him. Jesus and the Kingdom of God provided the only tonic strong enough to bring comfort and perspective.

This is why Luther stressed the importance of Christians gathering around Word and Sacrament each week, allowing everyone to place their lives, challenges, joys, sorrows and triumphs within the larger perspective God's work and the Kingdom Jesus proclaims. As I proclaimed Christ crucified and risen these past to Saturdays to large crowds, I have to admit that proclaiming the hope of Christ's resurrection must seem absurd to those without faith, and those words at the graveside, *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he dies he shall live"* must seem incomprehensible to some as a casket or urn is lowered to its resting place. And yet, as Christians our stories – as painful and troubling as they can be – just like everyone else's, are always to be heard and seen within Christ's story.

When the troubles of life fence us in, *finding ourselves standing knee deep in dust and ashes*, wringing our hands at God and saying, *"What have you done for me?"*

We hear the clear sharp words directed at us, *"This is my Body, given for you. My blood shed for you."* When we scream at God, *"You don't love me!"* Those clear words reach our inner ear, *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son to die for us."*

When life's troubles begin to fall upon us, that dust and ash covering everything good, and we become like caterpillars in cocoons or nuts hiding from hunting squirrels, we hear the words, *"I have come to give you life, and life abundantly. Be not afraid. I am with you always, until the end of the age."*

As Jesus faced the cross, hung on the cross, died on that cross, He endured and triumphed, not because he could overcome death alone, but

trusting that the Father and Spirit would not abandon Him.

The resurrection shows us that They did not. Instead, They carried Him – which Jesus allowed through passivity and trust – and overcame that which would overcome us all. The Triune God demonstrates for us that we must place our trust in God, and lean into the love of our neighbor when the dust and ashes pile up around us. When our trust and confidence weakens or we feel overwhelmed, rather than isolating ourselves as is our defensive tendency, we need to reach out to those whose faith and trust is strong and have them tell us again, “*A wandering Aramean was my father....* All the way through to our lives being baptized into the Risen One who sits on the throne.

Dust and ashes will inevitably filter down and pile up around us, but our Lord from the throne would remind us that dust and ashes make good soil, and from good soil, new and abundant life springs up.

AMEN!!