

WONDRIOUS LOVE

On this Ash Wednesday, the first day of the forty days of Lent, we turn to God remembering our mortality. Remembering our mortality, we turn to God who is Wondrous Love.

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this
that caused the Lord of bliss
to bear the dreadful curse
for my soul, for my soul,
to bear the dreadful curse for my soul?

In these past few years, we have buried and said goodbye to beloved family members. In February 2006, we gathered at the bedside of Carol's mother Luella Rowberg, as she lay dying. We buried her beside her husband Raymond, who died in 1981. In February 2009, after midnight on a Sunday morning, I received a phone call from my sister Gayle, that Dad had died of a heart attack. Less than a year ago, on April 7, as Carol and I were on our way to Shishmaref for the spring conference, while still in Nome, we received the phone call about our son Hans, dying in a work accident. It doesn't take much these days to remember, to be deeply reminded of our mortality—mine and yours. We are from the earth, from dust of the ground. God has breathed life into us. By the grace of God we have life and breath. But the day comes, some day certain, when we breathe no more and we return to the earth—earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Life is gift, God's gift of grace. It is God's good pleasure that we know the Giver of Life, that we know and experience God's Wondrous Love. It is God's good pleasure that we not take this gift of life for granted, but treasure God's gift and use it well—for the life of the world and for the glory of God. For some reason this scares us. Aware of our sin, of our divided loyalty and faulty fidelity to God, we are afraid that he will crush us, that he will judge us harshly, for indeed we are mere dust. Who are we that God would love us? Why would the Almighty God, Lord of heaven and earth, care for us? What can we do to make God love us, to earn God's kindness, to merit God's mercy?

When I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down,
When I was sinking down, sinking down,
When I was sinking down
beneath God's righteous frown,
Christ laid aside his crown
for my soul, for my soul,
Christ laid aside his crown for my soul.

Yes, the Lord of heaven and earth becomes one with us. When we are afraid, is this not the good news we need to hear and believe? This God of Wondrous Love becomes one with us, a creature of the dust. We are not alone. We are not forsaken. We are not judged by One who judges harshly, but we are wooed in compassion, embraced in mercy. The mighty God comes in weakness to welcome us in our weakness.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . Yes, God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. . . For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. . . We even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

To God and to the Lamb I will sing, I will sing;
To God and to the Lamb I will sing;
To God and to the Lamb,
Who is the great I Am,
while millions join the theme,
I will sing, I will sing,
while millions join the theme, I will sing.

Neither in life nor in death need we be afraid. Our God is wondrous in love, in love with us and for us. We are not afraid. Yes, we are mere dust from the ground. Yes, we are mortal. We are marked with a cross of ashes and thus reminded of our mortality. Yet, we know that the God of Wondrous Love has forever claimed us through the cross of Christ. This sign of death and mortality is for us also a promise, a word of hope, a sign of victory, the assurance of God's love from which nothing can separate us, not even death.

And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on, I'll sing on;
And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on;
And when from death I'm free,
I'll sing his love for me,
and through eternity
I'll sing on, I'll sing on;
and through eternity I'll sing on.

To God Alone Be Glory.

Amen.