

Ash Wednesday - 03/06/2019

Text: Joel 2:12-19; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Lent is a season of repentance, and the Scripture readings for Ash Wednesday properly prepare us for this season. Tonight I want especially to talk with you about how God is calling us to repentance, and then teaches us to bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

The prophet Joel in our Old Testament reading is prophesying about The Day of the Lord. This is that great and terrible Day when the Lord comes in judgment at the End of the age. The first part of chapter 2, just before our reading tonight is quite terrifying, describing a great and terrible army that comes to lay waste to Zion. And in the end, when the Lord comes, **"who can endure it?"** Joel asks.

God's wrath over sin is indeed a terrible and frightening thing. We put these ashes on our heads on Ash Wednesday as a mark and reminder of that terrible wrath. Some of the worst words I have to pronounce as a pastor, I pronounce on Ash Wednesday: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." I speak them to young and old alike. Every cute infant, every sweet grandma returns to dust. Every one of us is afflicted and cursed in the same way: sin courses through our veins, it's in our DNA. We are under the judgment of God.

Therefore we put on ashes. We wear ashes just like Job in his repentance and mourning. We cover ourselves like the king of Nineveh, faced with our great sin and having heard of the wrath of God against it. Like Jeremiah in his Lamentations we grind our teeth and cower in the ash heap because of the Holy and Righteous One who is both our creator and the one who stands in judgment over us.

None escape the Day of the Lord. Indeed, **"who can endure it?"**

But see here how the Lord is not interested in leaving us in our ashes and terror. He calls us to repentance. Now, repentance is *not* being sorry because it turns out the Lord is well aware of just how rebellious you are against Him, just how dark and sinful your heart really is. That's like being sorry because you got caught; because Mom knows about what happened at school even though you really hoped she wouldn't find out and she's standing there at the door with a stern look on her face when you get off the bus.

No, repentance is to mourn, to weep, to know that you are broken and that you can't do anything about it. It's to acknowledge that you have no hope before the Lord whatsoever in and of yourself. It's to know that your heart is so rebellious, so dark, so dead, so wicked, that every thought, word, and deed is against God. That is what it is to put on ashes; to repent.

Look how the Lord doesn't leave us in terror, but rather lovingly and kindly comes and bids us to get up from our ashes and be washed clean. **"Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." "He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor."**

"Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster."

God does not desire the death of a sinner, but that the sinner should turn from his ways and live. To repent is to weep bitterly over your death; and to then *turn*. And look how when you turn God has given you a wonderful person to behold. You don't turn and behold the terror of the glory of God, but instead you behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the one who has faced that mighty terror of God in your place. This is why even though we hear those terrible words and think on the immensity of our sin and put on ashes this night, we put them on in the shape of a cross. For upon a cross Jesus, the Lord of glory, bought us, with His lifeblood as the price. Our walk through Lent is a walk with Jesus to His cross, that we would remember that there on that cross we also died. There in that tomb we also lay. And in your baptism you have been put into that death and tomb: **"We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."**

And that brings us to the other main focus of Lent. We focus on repentance and faith in Christ, but we also focus on the good works, the fruits of repentance and faith, that Christ would have us do. And during Lent there are three specifically, as we heard from Jesus in Matthew 6.

Notice what Jesus teaches us to be doing here: **"When you give to the needy..." "When you pray..." "When you fast..."** Jesus doesn't say "if" but instead He presumes that this is what we are doing. In this Lenten season we ought to give attention to these things. He doesn't tell us exactly how we should be giving or praying or fasting, but He does expect that we His people will be doing so.

The traditional disciplines of Lent are almsgiving, special devotion to prayer, and fasting.

Almsgiving during Lent is extra giving to the needs of the poor. This could be something like making special donations to one of the local mercy organizations. It could be making sure that the food pantry here is always stocked and cared for. Or you might spend some time during Lent serving a meal at a local shelter.

Fasting is giving something up, usually food. You could forego a meal like lunch once or twice a week (though make sure you drink plenty of water). Or maybe you'll not go out to eat during Lent, and use that money instead for almsgiving. Maybe you'll stop watching TV in your household for Lent and instead spend it playing games with family and neighbors.

This training is good for us. It's not about taking on these disciplines to an extreme. But these things train us. If we can't discipline ourselves to give up eating out for a few weeks, how will we discipline ourselves if God lays on us a great cross or discipline?

We Lutherans have kept up pretty well the special devotion to prayer: this is where these special midweek services during Lent come from. It's also good for you to use this opportunity to devote your household to the Word of God. Use the Blue Sheet. Pray the Litany. It's in Lutheran Service Book if you have it. If not, I have copies of it on the table in the narthex.

Most importantly, though, during Lent we keep our eyes and hearts fixed on Jesus. We come to hear Him. We come to receive His Supper. He is our help, our shield, our Savior. In His death you are dead to sin. In His resurrection you are alive forevermore.

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