

ASH WEDNESDAY

February 14 2018

Old Test: Joel 2:12-19

Penitential Psalm: Ps. 51:1-13

Gospel: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Standing...

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Return to the Lord your God
for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Let us pray. God of mercy, forgive us all our sins for the sake of the bitter sufferings of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant us a triumphant faith by which we may obtain the victory in all afflictions and temptations and uphold us by Your grace when we must pass through the valley of the shadow of death. Amen.

Sitting...

Our Lenten journey begins today (tonight).
It is a journey to the other side of the cross,
to the empty tomb,
to our resurrected Lord,
to unrestrained joy.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Our Lenten journey begins with ashes—

used of course since Old Testament times.

Ashes are a self-imposed mark of public humiliation,
an outward sign of inner repentance.

They are a mark of sin and death,
a reminder that our bodies, even the bodies of babies,
will return to the dust

from which our human race was first taken.

But, ashes or no ashes, the fact is,
we already wear the marks of death on our faces.

We attempt to cover it but it's evidenced
 in every wrinkle and age spot on our skin.
 We have it in the glasses that help to correct our imperfect eyes,
 in the gray hair or the bald head,
 in all our frailties and infirmities,
 in our bent-over backs and our weak limbs.
 Beloved, we are dying;
 we suffer the consequence of sin.
 Death is coming.
 It's going to track you down
 and squeeze every bit of life from you.
 And then your breathless body will return to the dust,
 and return in judgment to the ashes.
 This is what we confess on Ash Wednesday.

Yet even with ashes on our foreheads and changes in our body,
 what reminds us best of our weakness, limits, imperfections, and sin
 is the Law of God—which shows us that we have wandered off,
 we, like sheep, have gone astray.

You all know what this Law is.
 It's been written on your hearts, instilled within your conscience,
 but it's a little fuzzy there.
 Hard to make out.
 So I'll remind you...

1. You shall have no other gods.
2. You shall not misuse the Name of the Lord your God.
3. Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy.

We hear His words, and then see our deeds;
 realizing the two are not the same—and thus, we are shattered by His Law.
 Accused. Guilty.

For starters, we have let the world entice us away from regular attendance at church and
 become lazy with family devotions.

Our spending reflects greater commitment to the world than to the kingdom of God—
 hence our Gospel lesson telling us about moths that eat, rust that corrodes and thieves
 that steal. Out stuff—all of it—it too will turn to ash.

Likewise, our prayers have faltered,
 as trivial, worldly things have taken us away from the things that truly matter.

Moreover, our hearts have grown distant and cold—
 apathetic to spiritual things.
 When the heart is distant,
 our worship of God takes on a certain emptiness, if not hypocrisy.

Instead of repenting over those things,
 you come up with excuses, denials and self-justification.

You are guilty of forgetting your first love—
 and that's just by looking at the commandments contained in the first table.
 Want to look at commandments four through ten?

Folks, when you throw ourselves against God, it's not God that falls to pieces.
 It's you.
 So repent.
 Put on ashes,
 Fast, mourn, and weep!
 Rend your heart,
 admit your sin,
 confess your guilt;
 and leave nothing hidden!
 Return to the Lord your God
 for He is gracious and merciful,
 slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

But this is not the only thing you need to hear today / tonight.
 Yes—the ashes on your forehead remind you of your mortality.
 But the ashes on your forehead are in the form of a cross.

The cross of Him whose love for you was so great,
 that He willingly took upon your dust and ashes, born of the Virgin Mary.
 In doing so, His body fails.
 He's picked at by mobs.
 Dies by thieves,
 and is stabbed by a rusty spear.
 Yet this is precisely what He came to do...
 To take that death of ours upon Himself and be forsaken by God.

See, if He breaks...if He goes under...so do you.

Yet, out of the dread darkness Jesus cries with a loud voice, triumphantly,
"It is finished."

He has done it.

He is through.

Then He goes on to make the way for us also
through the little death of the grave.

What this means is you are free...

Your sin is answered for.

Your idolatry, your cursing, and your disregard of God's word.

Your dishonoring of your parents and other authorities,
every hateful word you've said to make yourself look better
than someone else,

all your sexual sins,

your laziness and stealing,

your never being content with God's gifts

and always looking for happiness in what He never gave you.

Full atonement has been made.

Full and free forgiveness is yours,

a sheer gift.

What put you wrong with God, what separated you from Him, is gone.

And thus you can...

Return to the Lord your God for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

The ashes worn to/day/night are in the same cross that was put on you in Holy Baptism.

reminding you that your mortality is exchanged for His divine life—

His divine life which He has given you to eat and drink.

The medicine of immortality, as it's called...

that comes out of the side of Christ

into the chalice,

and into you—

sustaining you all your days in the one, true faith.

Finally, consider how the ashes into which we will disintegrate

will one day come back—come back—

in glorified, new bodies on the Last Day.

It's what humanity was meant to be before the Fall.

Beloved,

Death has no right to you in Christ—not now, not ever.
For you belong to Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Standing...

And now may the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sitting...