

ASH WEDNESDAY

February 26 2020

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. Almighty God, You have created us out of the dust of the earth; grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence, so we may remember that only by Your gracious gift are we given everlasting life; though Jesus Christ, our Savior. 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 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 the 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 every age spot.
We have it in our glasses that help to correct 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're dying;
 we suffer the consequence of sin,
 and 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 why men of old would greet one another on a regular basis with,
 "Memento Mori."—Remember that you must die.
 And this is what we recall on Ash Wednesday.

Yet even with ashes on our foreheads and changes in our body,
 what reminds us best of our weakness, limitations, sin and impending
 death...

 is the Law of God—which shows us that we have wandered off.
 We, like sheep, have gone astray.

You all know what the Law of God 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 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.

You hear His Law, and then see your deeds;
 realizing the two are not the same—and thus, you are left shattered—
 flayed.

 Accused. Guilty.

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

Your 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. Your stuff—all of it—will eventually be sold in a yard
 sale—and what's not, will sometime later be tossed out in the rubbish heap.

Likewise, your prayers have faltered—you really don't have time to pray...
 because trivial, worldly things have taken you away
 from the things that truly matter.

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

Instead of repenting over these 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 of the first table.
 Want to look at commandments four through ten?

Folks, when you throw ourselves against God, it's not God who falls to
 pieces.
 It's you.
 So repent.
 Wear the ashes. But do more than that!
 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.
Memento Mori.
 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 after 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 yours 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 you 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 you will disintegrate
will one day come back—come back—

in a glorified, new body on the Last Day.

It is 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.

The Lord my Creator took me as dust from the earth,
and formed me into a living being, breathing into me the breath of life.
God honored me,
setting me as ruler upon earth over all things visible,
and made me companion of the angels.
But Satan the deceiver,
using the serpent as instrument,
enticed me by food—
parted me from the glory of God,
and gave me over to the earth and to the lowest depths of the earth.
But in compassion, O Savior, call me—call us—back again! 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...