



SAINT LUKE'S

ASH WEDNESDAY
YEAR C

JOEL 2:1-2, 12-17
2 CORINTHIANS 5:20B-6:10
MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21
PSALM 103

A SERMON BY THE REV. WILLIAM OGBURN
MARCH 6, 2019

✠ In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today, Ash Wednesday, is a solemn day that invites and propels us into prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Lent is a time for us to reflect on our lives and to examine the things that get in our way of turning towards God. It is a time to look at how we can redirect and reorient ourselves away from our selfishness, from our self-centeredness and towards God as the center.

At the beginning of our weekday masses, we pray the Collect for Purity: “Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

This beautiful prayer reminds us that God is the ‘searcher of the heart.’ In it we ask that God would purify our hearts that we may love and praise God perfectly. This is a summary of what Lent is all about. It is about being open to God, the searcher of our hearts.

In the season of epiphany, which has just ended, we remember the blazing light of Jesus’ Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. That same light continues to shine on us and into the dark and messy corners of our hearts. When the light of Christ shines, it reveals good things and also things that we would rather remain hidden. Christ’s light shows hows us exactly who we are – and exactly how we are. And it can be a hard reality to face. Lent is about having the courage and the trust in Jesus to open our eyes to see where the mucky mess is – and to begin putting to right the choices we

make in our relationship with God through Christ, our relationship with one another, and our relationship with ourselves.

When something is purified, something is removed...something is taken away. During Lent, God calls us to examine what needs to be purified in our lives that we may be reconciled to God, as Paul commands us in our lesson from 2nd Corinthians. Paul tells us that Jesus took on our sins so that we may be purified and so that we would become “the righteousness of God.” If we are to be reconciled to God, we must first confess our sins. Before we can confess our sins, we have to discern what they are! Lent is a time for us to spend time doing the challenging work of genuine self-examination.

Self-examination is best done through three things: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. In prayer, we can be our truest selves, because from God, there are no secrets hidden. We don't have to worry about the facades we put up for each other –and we don't have to worry about the walls we build up to protect ourselves from other people's criticism and judgment. In prayer, we can just pray to God as we are and know that we are loved without condition.

Fasting and self-denial are not meant to harm us. They are meant to make us more keenly aware of what basic things we need, especially when we live in such a consumerist-centered world. Fasting reminds us that our daily bread is a gift from God – and it also reminds us of what the poorest among us endure daily. As the Gospel lesson teaches us, the intent of our fasting is everything. If we do it for show and to attempt to impress others

with our piety and devotion, God is not honoured. If we fast and deny ourselves in order to become closer to God, then God is praised. People may see your piety, but if your intent is pure, then God is still honoured.

With intentions oriented towards God and away from ourselves, we are then provoked to almsgiving: giving of our time, our gifts, and from our abundance. Almsgiving in God's service in this world is an acknowledgement that all we have is not ours, but is God's. Giving keeps us from storing our treasures in places "where moth and rust consume." If we give back to God of the goodness we have been given, we show our gratitude for God's mercies. This sharply reinforces our understanding that God's love for us is everlasting.

And if our love for God is genuine, and the acknowledgement of our sins is thorough, our contrite hearts are ready to be purified from the things that get in our way towards God. When we are truly sorry for the grievous things that get between us and God, we can only then be truly reconciled. It is also important to note that this is not something we could ever achieve on our own, but has been shown us in love of Jesus on the Cross. It is through Jesus that we are reconciled to God – and we rely on his grace and mercy to sustain our contrition.

Yesterday, we gathered on the steps of the Church to burn palms. We burned the palms from last year's Palm Sunday. The same palms we used to hail Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem were the same palms strewn on the ground on Good Friday. Symbols of our praise and symbols of our betrayal

were purified in the flames of a holy fire. Today we will receive ashes from those burned palms as a sign of our mortality. They also remind us of our sin, the things that keep us from loving God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind – and our neighbor as ourselves. “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” These words are a reminder of what we all as humans fear most: death.

One day, we will die.

Each Ash Wednesday, The church calls us to remembrance of this: that one day each of us will die. We also believe that one day we will stand before Christ in judgment. Ash Wednesday is a rehearsal of our death. It is practicing for that day where we will stand before Christ and the only thing we can say is "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." This Lent, whether you give something up or take something on, pray this prayer every day. It's called the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." And also, whether you take something on or give something up, be kinder to one another. We all struggle, we all fail, we all want to do better. Encourage one another and build each other up. We walk this Christian life together.

Being a Christian is not an easy thing. But nothing easy is ever worth anything . Anything that promises you something easy will always let you down. Lent teaches and reminds us that we do not live for ourselves alone, but for Jesus, who lives for us.

Lent is a time for us to draw nearer to God and to be reconciled to God and to each other. May our prayer, self-examination, self-denial, almsgiving, and our heartfelt desire to be God's beloved children bring us closer to God, the searcher of the heart. And may we never, for even one second, forget that under the dusty smudge of these fleeting ashes on our foreheads, is the indelible mark of being anointed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and being marked as Christ's own forever!

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

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