

Ash Wednesday – 2023
Joel 2:12-19
2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

As a teenager, I had mush for brains. My mother loved me; a lot. I certainly profited mightily from her oversight but she also enabled me. Enabling; are you familiar with this term? As defined by the American Psychological Association, enabling refers to the patterns within close relationships that support harmful or problematic behavior and make it easier for that behavior to continue. My mother got me out of more than a few scraps. My wonderful mother would sometimes get between me and the unpleasant repercussions of my bad behavior. I had mush for brains. I soon began to think that there *wouldn't be* any repercussions for my bad behavior.

It is impossible to know what the glorious woman was thinking. Eve was glorious. God made her that way. She was holy, full of life, a spiritually radiant creature. Adam no doubt told her what God had told him: “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17). What was Eve’s conception of death? Who can say? What did Eve have to base her conception of death on? Did she view death as a judgment, as a force of finality, an unrelenting and cruel and massively bitter darkness from which she could never extricate herself? Do you think that Eve took God’s Word regarding death seriously? Was Eve a gambler? Did the prospect of having something so deliciously enticing lead her to gamble that death was a phantom, a non-reality, that God would protect her against any unpleasant repercussion of her bad behavior? Does God enable sin?

What was Eve’s sin? She wanted to be like God, right? She wanted to establish her own standard for right and wrong, right? She wanted to define truth for herself, right? My body, my choice; I can eat what I want. Death; she flirted with death not knowing what it was. Eve gave death to her husband and her husband ate. Eve spiritualized death, dreamed up her own vision of what it was and abandoned God’s Word. She reached out her hand, she took some of the fruit and ate it and thereby Eve gave you death. What is your conception of death? Do you know its contours, its boundaries, its content, its rigidity, its power, its foundation, its limits, its weaknesses, its allies? Do you know any of those things? You don’t, really. Most of humanity sees death as the cessation of life. That is altogether inadequate. Mush for brains sees death as the cessation of life. Death has a character all its own. As Eve’s son lay murdered in the field, was she able to “spiritualize” the enormity of death? Do you believe that your sin doesn’t have repercussions?

Remember, O man, that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return (Genesis 3:19). Today death is in view. We have zero interest in turning death into a celebrity. Ash Wednesday is not a death-cult feast day. We are now, and ever shall be, disciples of life. God’s voice, spoken through the prophet Joel, is heard this day. “Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (Joel 2:12-13).

Return implies departure. Sin is departure. Sin is death's antecedent, its ally, its foundation and its portal. Sin is in your life and in mine. Some of you may think that you don't depart from God all that much. That you are faithful day in and day out and that return is a misnomer, a false flag. Here's what Isaiah wrote: "We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us have turned to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6). Here's what St. Paul wrote: "There is no one righteous, not even one. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Romans 3:10-12). Return is *exactly* the right word.

Return is exactly what God wants. There is only one way. God is the only one who truly knows what death is. God knows death's contours, its power, its rigidity, its menace and its bitter darkness. God sent His Son to confront death, to subdue it, to empty it of its power. Do you believe that Jesus ever underestimated His adversary? Do you believe that Jesus ever whitewashed Sin, Death, Satan? Do you believe that Jesus fully understood the tactics of the evil one? Do you believe that Jesus and our culture see death in the same way? "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). St. John wrote that. The devil had won for himself a race of slaves, bound to him, bound to death by our sin and he was the tyrant who accused us before our Father day and night (Revelation 12:10). We were lost and the Son of God came to win our return.

The mark of your return is on your forehead. A cross; yours is in ashes; our return is in blood. The ashes of palm fronds, that's what's on your forehead. Palm fronds from Palm Sunday; they lined the nave of our church, standing as sentinels as Hosannas rang in your mouth and we celebrated the Lord's Triumphant Entry in Jerusalem. Now they are ashes on your brow. The jubilation of Palm Sunday morphed into a cry for His blood on Good Friday. "His blood be upon us and our children" (Matthew 27:25). "Crucify, crucify him" (Luke 23:21). We burned those palm fronds. The ashes of fickle allegiance is the sign of repentance that you bear. We do not want to be those people. We do not want to sing His praises one day and live a faithless, selfish, and empty life the next. Repent! His love is also on your brow. It's His cross you bear. It's His life that is in you. His righteousness is your return. His love is your return. His blood is your return.

He planned it. God orchestrated your return perfectly. Mary is the new Eve. Gabriel, the archangel, told her that she would conceive and Mary believed him. Eve was tempted by a fallen angel. Mary was told the Gospel by an angel of light. A tree was the instrument whereby death came to us, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A tree, cut down and hewn into a cross, would be the instrument of our return. God planned your return perfectly. He planned for you to hear the living Word of a living Savior. Christ was living and active on the cross, accomplishing your return. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). And then He died. God died. God went into death. God saw it, felt it, knew it. Out of love for you, Jesus died. Completely, fully; the Son of God suffered and He died. That's your return. My sin was on Jesus when He died. Your pride and your greed and all that which is ugly in you was on Him when He died. Return to the Lord your God for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and abounding in steadfast love. Satan cannot accuse you. Jesus' paid for your sin and you are forgiven.

Death was no match for our Lord. Holy is He! Beneath our sin was a holiness in Him so profound that death yielded its victim and Christ rose from the dead. Christ is the Victor. Jesus shields us from the repercussions of our sin but He does not enable us; He changes us (Romans 12:1-2). We do not have mush for brains, we have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). We are not slaves to sin for we have been liberated, set free (John 8:36). You have been made holy (1 Peter 1:16). You possess Christ's righteousness. You shall live. Resurrection is your return. Ash Wednesday's children are children of the resurrection. Tonight we set our face toward Easter. Tonight we eat Christ's body and drink His blood and we know that the Word of God is living and active in us. On this Ash Wednesday, what have you received? You have received perfect remission and forgiveness. We are disciples of life.