

Ash Wednesday – 2024

Joel 2:12-19

2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Another day in paradise? No, it wasn't. Adam and Eve were banished from paradise. East of Eden is where we live. East of Eden is the land of death and slavery. East of Eden is the land of shame and guilt. Paradise was indeed lost. God's authoritative Word was not something that our first parents could argue with. An angel with a flaming sword cast them out of Eden, out of Paradise. The tree of life was out of their reach and they were banished justly. "Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:17-19).

Does man know justice when it is spoken on him? How did you feel when the words spoken to Adam and Eve were put in your ear? Do you think that what you felt is anything approximating what they felt as their Creator, the One who walked with them in the cool of the day, spoke His judgment and cast them out of paradise? The Bible says that the law is written on the heart (Romans 2:15). God created us in such a way that we know, in some intrinsic way, good from evil. Some pervert this knowledge. Some deny their Maker. Some call evil good and good evil. In one of the most beautiful chapters of Scripture Jesus is recorded as saying this: "And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come into the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God" (John 3:19-21).

Some love darkness and therefore they won't come into the light. The very fact that they won't come into the light proves that they know, in some way intrinsically know, that divine justice is real. The unbelieving will be cast into hell. They will know the justice of it and they will have a pain of heart and mind that cannot be described. Dust you are and to dust you shall return. That is justice. Because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man (Romans 5:17). Original sin will bring death to you. That is justice. Cain rose up and murdered his brother. God spoke to Cain: "When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth" (Genesis 4:12). That is justice. Cain knew it. He whined about it but Cain knew it. Murder comes from the heart. Hatred and malice and jealousy and pride and avarice and lust and selfishness come from the heart (Matthew 15:19). Fallen man possesses a heart that is east of Eden.

Astonishingly, God says this: "'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.' 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" (Joel 2:12-13). Return to Me. Thus says the Lord your God. Return; beneath that word is a love that sacrifices His Son for the sins of the world. Justice requires payment. Sin requires death. And God sends His Son. Jesus is your innocent substitute. The Lord Christ is your return. The Son of God took upon Himself the

form of a servant, being born in your likeness. To win your return to paradise the Incarnate Son of God lived under the law, was obedient to the law, loved God above all things and loved His neighbor as Himself. He gave. Perpetually, fully, lovingly – He gave. His righteousness is your return. His flesh is your return. His sacrifice is your return. His empty tomb is your return. All of this is done entirely for you. This is the glorious gospel which animates millions upon millions of those who love the light, who know grace when they hear it, who have been captivated by the Holy Spirit and given a faith that is God-breathed.

What does this Gospel do? It changes the heart of man. “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ezekiel 36:25-27). Return to God is a return to paradise. A new heart is a divinely constructed heart, a Christian heart, a repentant and faithful heart. Is it not your desire to love God above all things and your neighbor as yourself? You have a new heart. Do you not renounce Satan and all his works and all his ways? You have a new heart. Do you not know justice as it streams from your mouth as you confess all your sins and iniquities with which you have ever offended the Lord of glory? You have a new heart. This is God’s doing. This is God’s Word in action, Christ in action, the Holy Spirit in action.

Your life is to reflect your faith. Lent is a time of self-examination. What unholy behaviors have crept back into your life? What worldly infatuations do you harbor that need to be abandoned? Some in our extended Lutheran circles are antinomian. Antinomian is a fancy way of saying that we don’t need all that heavy conviction talk, we don’t need to hear about cleaning up the pigpen of our heart, we don’t need to hear the bad news of our sin and its incongruence with God’s desires, God’s expectations. Well, that’s just flat wrong. Reprove, rebuke, and exhort; so said St. Paul to a young pastor named Timothy (2 Timothy 4:2). Vulgarity, indecency, and self-indulgence are anathema to a Christian. Be holy for I am holy. God says that as a demand on your behavior. He has made you holy through the blood of His Son. You are indeed holy by Christ’s work. You must not profane what God has made holy. Self-discipline is a vital part of Lent. Put away all that which is old. The leaven of malice and evil is what is old. You are new. You’ve been made new in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). His righteousness is in you. His resurrection is in you. You are new.

God has given you His law. “The law has been given to men for three reasons: (1) to maintain external discipline against unruly and disobedient men, (2) to lead men to the knowledge of their sin, (3) to guide Christians so that they will know what is pleasing to Him” (Formula of Concord, Art. VI). We pay attention to God’s law at all times and in all ways but especially during Lent. The law drives us to Christ. The law trains us in righteousness. The law is just and we love what is just. The magnificence of our faith is that a Savior on a cross is the highest form of justice. It is love and it is grace and it is justice. Christ paid that price for you and forgiveness marks every step you take in this life. His blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:24). The righteousness of one man is extended over all the sons of Adam, all the daughters of Eve (Romans 5:18). He was not from the dust of the earth but from the Father’s right hand. The eternal Son of God was put on a tomb. Good Friday, at the end of Lent is the

commemoration of Christ's death and burial. Ash Wednesday, at the beginning of Lent is the commemoration of our death, our burial. The two are connected. Christ has claimed you and you will live even though you die (John 12:25). The Lord is risen from the dead. Death has no mastery over Him (Romans 6:9). Death has no mastery over you. Paradise is your home; not this place, east of Eden. Repent and believe the Good News (Mark 1:15).