

Ash Wednesday – 2025
Joel 2:12-19
2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

There is a certain emotion to an Ash Wednesday Divine Service. It's akin to the emotion that saturated the Garden after the fall, akin to the emotion of a loved one's funeral, akin to receiving a cancer diagnosis. We often associate painful emotions with misfortune and loss and we do our level best to avoid them. Some folks insulate themselves from the darker side of the emotional spectrum by pretending that loss isn't real, isn't agonizing. I think that we've all run across emotionally flat people, emotionally damaged people, folks who seem to be emotionally restrained. It's a defense mechanism. I can relate. Some pain makes us feel like we are going to break apart. To engage others while feeling shattered on the inside makes one feel terribly vulnerable.

This is funeral setting. Good Friday, at the end of Lent, is the commemoration of the death and burial of the Lord Christ. Ash Wednesday, at the beginning of Lent, is the commemoration of our death, our burial. Remember, O man, that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return (Genesis 3:19). Those are the just words of our Creator who stood in judgment over sin. I've been a sinner all my life. In sin did my mother conceive me (Psalm 51:5). Adam was different. Imagine knowing what he knew. Imagine being perfect, holy, without spot or blemish or defect. Imagine the glory of Adam loving his wife without jealousy, without insecurity, without lust or fear or anger or even a shadow of doubt regarding her love for him. Imagine walking with God in the cool of the day and loving Him perfectly in everything that you think or do. Imagine knowing God's favor, God's blessing as a perpetual gift... and then losing it, by a selfish act of deliberate rebellion... losing it. That would be emotional. Certainly, death is a woeful verdict that would weigh heavily on Adam, but don't you think that losing the perfect harmony that Adam had with God was even more brutal? How's that going to be restored?

What does it feel like when your sin presses you sore? When you are brought to your knees in repentance, what is it that your heart is searching for? Is it just a kneejerk reaction to guilt, just sorrow over a tragic choice, just regret over an ill-begotten behavior that you want blotted out? Does your soul know that there is more to this life than eating and drinking, more to this life than procreation and labor and your pillow and your flower garden and your wardrobe and your sports teams and your 401K? Harmony with God; it's pretty tough to beat, right? Distance from God – can you feel it when the space between you and God increases? Return to Me. God is making a loving demand. Return to Me. There is an assumption behind that fatherly call. The assumption is that you have distanced yourself from Him. “‘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). God wants you as His own. He doesn't pretend not to notice when you distance yourself from Him because of your preference for sin over His commands. He will bring you back.

When you are brought to your knees in repentance, it is God searching for you. He has caused His Spirit to live in you. When you defy Him, He will awaken in your heart the pain of

repentance. Don't push it off. Embrace repentance. Embrace the judgment of Eden – remember O man that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return. It is a blessed road that we embark on tonight. Faith and light and hope and resurrection are on this road, but it starts with the black hue of Ash Wednesday, it starts with the realization that we are mortal and death is our lot. Sin is not theoretical. Sin is not abstract or just the hypothesizing of the religiously zealous. Sin is real. The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Death is something that we deserve, something that we have earned because we have worked for it. Embrace that. That reality is deep and troubling and true. Embrace that. The person who embraces that is eager to return to God with their whole heart. The person who embraces that is eager to rend their heart in a genuine act of contrition and not simply rend their garment in a theatrical display of shallow piety.

I can't imagine the pain that Adam felt, that Eve felt, when they were banished from the Garden. But I have been heartsick over my own sin. And God was there, begging for me to come to Him, paving the way for my return. Death is always near but in the last few months it has extended a long shadow over our beloved congregation. Who will be called to heaven before the next Ash Wednesday Service? Are we ready? I've always considered myself to be a decent pastor. As I age, I am becoming more focused, reducing the churchly cosmetics and distilling the life of faith. One thing I desire above all others – that every single saint of Christ the King is ready when God calls. "Return to Me" is our destiny, our future, our hope, and our joy. Christ is our return. The ashes that adorn your brow are an emblem of death, but the sign of the cross is your return. The crucified King is our return. Life, not death, is our return. Our Lord conquered death. He defeated death by submitting Himself to it, bearing all sin, and He was banished, cast out from among the living. Death swept over Him, snatched at Him, preyed upon Him. Our sin made Jesus' death necessary. But He paid the price, paid it in full, and He rose.

On this night, you are a child of the resurrection. We are not here to pretend that Jesus isn't risen from the dead. We're not here this night to pretend that death has regained its sting. We are not here this night to pretend that we don't have the answer, that our forgiveness is in doubt, or that we have to pay some elusive price that hasn't already been paid. Christ's glory is with us even when our paraments are black and there are veils over our crosses and great solemnity rules the liturgy. We are children of the resurrection. Life is our heritage. Life is our joy. That is why we strive to eliminate pride and lust and greed from our heart, our behavior, our mind. We apply ourselves to repentance, taking it out of the abstract and working hard to avoid gossip and slander and taking God's name in vain. We apply ourselves to repentance and work hard to "discipline my body and keep it under control" (1 Corinthians 9:27). We honor the commandments because we are children of the Light (1 Thessalonians 5:5). It's work. Lent is work. It is good work, important for us and, by extension, important for those near to us.

God's grace follows us. The wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23). That cross you bear is the emblem of love and grace, and it is the emblem of heaven. "Return to Me" is a call to heaven. Some have fallen asleep in Christ since the last Ash Wednesday service. They are in heaven. Christ's blood set them free from sin and death. Heaven is the road we are on. The Lord Jesus blazed that trail (John 14:3). He is our return (Luke 23:43). We live in the confidence that death has no mastery over Him therefore it has no mastery over us (Romans 6:9). What does that generate in your heart? It generates trust and hope and purpose and vigor and love. Those are the resources of Lent. God will be with us

as we set our face toward Holy Week, toward Golgotha and the empty tomb. His grace animates this holy house and we will walk steadfastly, together, through this penitential season knowing who governs our lives and what He has done to save us.