

5 March 2003
Ash Wednesday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Our Sin Offering”

Text: Joel 2:12-19 (2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

External repentance is easy. Rending, or tearing, our garments. Putting on sackcloth. Having ashes imposed on our foreheads. Or as we heard in Jesus’ words from St. Matthew, **“practicing our righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.”** That’s the easy part. . . . It is true repentance, repentance of the heart and mind, a changing of the way we think and act, a solemn realization that *“we are dust, and to dust we shall return”* – that’s the hard part. The part we don’t like. The part we’d rather do without. That’s why the prophet Joel had to write about it. Because our tendency is to make a good show of it and do the right things, *outwardly*; while inwardly retaining what we can, whatever we can get away with. Children learn this early on – that *looking* sorry can sometimes appease the ol’ parents and enable them to get away with what they did, while not really being sorry for it at all. Well do we, as children *of God*, try to pull this on our Heavenly Father sometimes as well? Making a good show of it, but secretly clinging to those sins we like so much and would really rather not have to give up?

Well, God will have none of that. God who judges the heart, the mind, and the will; and knows our secret and innermost thoughts, words, deeds, and desires. The world, your friends and acquaintances, your neighbors and workmates, may think you’re a pretty good person. But God knows better. Try as we might, we cannot fool Him. You may be able to fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, and perhaps – even contrary to this saying – you can even fool all of the people all of the time. But you cannot fool God any of the time. . . . **“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”** And maybe what we should repent of first of all is our lack of repenting!

That was the problem in the prophet Joel’s day – there had been such a spiritual decay that people were either ignoring God and not repenting, or those who did “repent” were doing so as a sham, a nice outward show for God. And so God, in order to get His people’s attention and let them know that He was not pleased with this course of events, sent a plague of locusts on the land, which devoured everything. For locusts swarms

show no mercy. Trees are stripped, fields are laid bare, and if the swarm is particularly severe, there is *quite literally* nothing left. And so what happens? The flocks die for lack of food, the people die for lack for food, and things quickly get desperate.

And so Joel, as the voice of God, calls the people to repentance. ***“Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”*** Return, Joel says, because as terrible as this “Day of the Lord” has been, there is an even more dreadful “Day of the Lord” coming, on the last day, the day of great judgment, and when that day comes, there will be no chance to repent! It will then be too late! Return now. Return. . . . But there is problem – a major problem; its not that easy! For the people have nothing to bring to God for sacrifices to come into His presence! There is no wheat with which to bring a grain offering; no olives to make oil with which to bring a drink offering – the locusts have consumed everything! The flocks are suffering, and so there are no perfect lambs to bring. The Lord has taken away everything, Joel! How *can* we return? . . . And so Joel tells them: ***“Return with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.”*** Or in other words, *the show is over*. God had to take away everything that you’ve been relying on. Now its time for the real thing.

And sometimes that’s what it takes, isn’t it? Sometimes God has to take away from us before He can give back to us. And while such hardship is never pleasant, in the end, it is good for us.

And that is why we gather here this evening, especially this evening, this Ash Wednesday. To bow our heads, and if we have been putting on a show of repentance, to hear those words once again, *the show is over*. . . . But as it was for the people in Joel’s day, so it is for us – we also have nothing to bring the Lord. We are nothing but sin. Even all our good deeds are to God as filthy rags. Why should God take us back? How can we return? . . . Well it is the Apostle Paul who tells us, for while we have nothing to provide for a sin offering, God has provided the offering for us. ***“For our sake He made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin to be a sin offering for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”*** And so we can return because of Christ. Because of the Lamb of God who gave Himself as a sin offering not just for the sin of the world, but for your sin, and for my sin. . . . And so as we approach God as poor, miserable sinners, it is Christ who stands in our place. The One who offered Himself on our behalf. And because of Christ’s merits, God forgives. Because of Christ’s sacrifice, our Father accepts us. Because of Christ, we are declared righteous in God’s sight.

And as Paul said, echoing Joel, ***“Behold, now is the favorable time; now is the day of salvation.”*** Now, is the time to return and repent. Now is the time to *stop the show*. Now is the time to get real. Now and everyday, because it is not yet too late. Christ has

not yet come again as our judge, but is still interceding for us. He is still standing in our place. He is still forgiving. All that He is and all that He has He offers to you here and now. For He ***“is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”*** . . . And so we come, relying on Him. We come with nothing but faith in His promise of love and forgiveness and grace, and we are not disappointed! For it is exactly for us who *are* nothing and *have* nothing that Christ came. To be for us what we are not. To give to us what we have not. And to take us where we could not possibly go ourselves – to the very throne room of Heaven, to live in the presence of God and the Lamb forever.

But in addition to his call to repentance, Joel has to add another word of warning to the people, so that the people do not repent – however sincerely – for the wrong reasons. That would be just as bad as what was going on before. For the temptation is there for the people of Joel’s day to repent *so that* God will restore their fortunes and give back to them everything that the locusts have taken away. It is a means to an end. . . . But no, Joel says. For ***“Who knows whether or not He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him?”*** Now Joel wasn’t talking about God’s love or forgiveness with those words! That has been promised to us by God by grace through faith in our Saviour. In Joel’s day it was faith in the promised Saviour who was still to come, and in our day it is faith in the Saviour who has come. No, we do not *ever* have to worry or wonder about that! . . . But Joel’s reminder to the people then is a good reminder to us still today. Will our repentance mean a change in our fortunes right now? Will things go easier? Will we have all that we want or need? Not necessarily. And we should not repent as a means to that end. For as we heard in the Gospel, ***“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth.”*** And do not set your heart on such things.

Rather, we know that our glory lies in the future. The glory of Heaven. The glory of eternal life. God has already given us His promise of Heaven and eternal life, and those are already ours, even now – but we do not yet have them in their fullness. Rather, as we repent, we look forward to the glory that awaits us. As we gather at our Lord’s Table, we look forward to being around His Table in Heaven. As we come into the presence of God and the Lamb here, we look forward to coming into His unveiled presence in Heaven. And so that we would not ever worry about that or doubt it, God gives to us all of those gifts here and now, through His Word, through His water, through His Supper. He gives His forgiveness, His strength, His grace, His love – all that He has. For He has promised to be always here for us.

So dear brothers and sisters in Christ, ***“Return to the Lord, your God.”*** Do not wait for “locusts” or struggles, but today and every day, return. ***“For He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.