

9 February 2005
Ash Wednesday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Bad Change; the Good Change”

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

Change. We live in a world that’s constantly changing. Sometimes that change is good; sometimes that change is bad. Sometimes we want change and desire change; sometimes we just wish things would stay the same. Some changes we can control; some we cannot.

Tonight, earlier, we heard and acknowledged a change that is both bad and beyond our control: and that is death. Death, which is the wage, the payment, for our sin. (Rom 6:23) “*Dust you are, and to dust you will return*” is how that was phrased tonight. Adam, once perfectly formed by God out of the dust of the earth, will now return in death to the dust from which he was formed. And so will we. The sin we love – no matter how big, no matter how small – all comes at a high price.

But I didn’t need to tell you that. You know it. You’ve had friends and family that have been taken from you in death. We sometimes try to phrase that nicely, that they *departed*. No they didn’t; they were *taken*. Sin did it. And we should hate it. . . . And most of you know the high price of sin in your own bodies, which are even now returning to dust; wearing out. Hair turning gray, eyes and ears not working as they should, aches and pains, diseases that attack. We’re not as strong or fast as we used to be. . . . Oh, we try to deny all of that. Or at least cover it up. Medicines help us feel better, glasses make us see better, and working out can turn back the clock a bit. Make-up can cover and surgery can tuck a few wrinkles. But in the end it’s all the same for you and I and Adam. “*Dust you are, and to dust you will return.*”

Tonight we recognize and acknowledge that. No denying, no covering up. Ashes. Black. Return to the Lord your God. Rending our hearts in repentance. Sin is not just what we do, it is who we are. And that’s important to confess, because on a night like tonight, the danger is that we think of our sins as separate pieces, separate things, items on a list of things we did wrong, and that if we try hard enough, we can make that list shorter. We can do better. We can improve. And Ash Wednesday becomes about self-improvement. . . . And you know, that’s exactly what Satan wants you to think, so that you try to deal with your sins yourself. Or at least part of them. Maybe I’ll depend on

Christ to deal with the big ones, *the whoppers*, but I'll take care of the little ones myself. And of course, we'll want to make sure others know I'm dealing with them, and doing my part. They'll see my fasting and praying and giving. They'll see that I mean it. They'll see some difference in me!

But if that is your thinking, what did God say through Matthew? ***"You have received your reward."*** If it is the praise of men we want, it is the praise of men we will receive.

But that is not why we're here. Christianity is not about self-improvement; our problem is much bigger than that. It's a matter of life and death. And so tonight we heard from the prophet Joel, ***"Rend your hearts and not your garments."*** For ***"a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."*** (Ps 51) And so we here not to resolve, but to repent. Not only of our sin, but of our pride. Not only of what we do, but who we are. Not only of our rebellion, but of believing in ourselves rather than in God. For that is the heart of all our sin: believing in me instead of in God. My effort, my heart, my sincerity, my change. . . . No. The change that we need must come from outside of us. It must be given to us. It must come from nothing we have done. For only then will it be a *good* change. A change from death to life.

And so just as we have come before this altar tonight to receive the ashes of the change that we have wrought; so also we come to this altar tonight to receive the life that God has wrought. The life that death cannot end. Life in the forgiveness of our sin. Life through the death and resurrection of Jesus. For the holy, precious blood of God's Son has provided what no amount of effort on our part could ever provide – the price and payment for our sin. Only His blood was payment enough, and so that price He paid – the bitter agony and death of the cross, for you, in your place. The perfect in place of the sinner. The Son in place of the slave. The innocent in place of the guilty. His life in exchange for yours, so that all that you are might be blotted out; and all that He is given to you. Free. And this is the gift that has changed you, from nothing you have done, from completely outside of you. A good change. So that you are no longer guilty, but innocent. No longer a slave, but a son. No longer dead in your sins, but alive in your Saviour Jesus Christ. Given a life that death cannot end.

St. Paul wrote of this in the Epistle that we heard: ***"For our sake He made Him who knew no sin [Jesus] to be sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."*** That is the gift now given to you. That is why we are here this night. That is why we repent. That is why the body of Jesus, once hung and the cross, and the blood of Jesus, once poured from the cross, will be placed into your mouths this night. That by faith, you receive Him and His life and His forgiveness. That our hearts will be where our true treasure is. That we will be changed. A good change. The right change. The sin

and dust and death of Adam forever undone, and the life and love of God our future hope and our present reality.

Oh, the darkness will still have its day. As long as we live in this world, we still have the ugliness of sin and death with us. But not for long. For the darkness that begins Lent never has the final word – Easter does. And that day is coming for us. Tonight is the night of sackcloth and ashes. There is a time for everything. Repent. Rend your heart. ***“Return to the Lord, your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”*** He will not leave you in the dust. Come. The ashes and tears of earth are soon to be replaced with the joy and feasting of Heaven.

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

Please rise for prayer.