

6 February 2008
Ash Wednesday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Return for Life”

Text: Joel 2:12-19; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; 2 Cor 5:20b-6:10

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

“Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

Return. That is what this season of Lent is all about.
Returning to the Lord, from whom we have wandered and gone astray.
And so Lent means going back to where you once were.
Repenting of where we have gone, and returning to where we have already been.
And so our destination is to the same place from whence our journey began.
And that place is **the cross**.

For we began this journey, this Christian life, joined to Jesus and His cross in Holy Baptism. And there, by water, Word, and Spirit, our sin was forgiven, and we were given a new life. There, all the promises of God were given to us – not a single one withheld! There God said to us, *“You are my beloved child.”* And we cried to Him, *“Abba, Father.”* (Gal 4:6) And our journey in this new life began.

But where have we journeyed? What have we done with this new life, given to us, this gift of God’s grace?

Have we honored our Father with lives of faith and love, with lives of service, in lives of confession? Or have we turned from Him, and chosen our own way? Do we grumble at His Word, resist His will, doubt His goodness, and rebel against His discipline? Are we pleased with Him when life is good, and angry when things aren’t going my way? And how often so we listen to the siren song of satan, instead of relying on the promises of our Father?

How is it with you and your life?

You know the answer.

And the answer is not good, is it?

It's not good because in all these things, we are believing in ourselves rather than believing in God. Such is the way of sin, which has curved us in on ourselves, so that the first place I look for answers is the unholy law firm of me, myself, and I. And we kind of like that, because then I'm the one in control.

And control is easier than faith.

And then the world comes along and supports us in this, and says this is good! To believe in yourself. That is a virtue! To believe in yourself. To be all that you can be. To pull yourself up by the bootstraps.

Yes, the world calls that good.

But God has another word for it: **death**.

Because on your own, believing in yourself, that is all you can accomplish.

For apart from God there is no life.

Only death. Be it sooner, or later.

And so tonight we received the ashes of death imposed upon our foreheads. *For dust you are, and to dust you will return.* And they are rather *imposing*, aren't they? Serious, and sobering. And if you are embarrassed by them, and feel a bit funny and uncomfortable with them . . . well, *good*.

"Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

Turn from the father of lies, and return to the Father of life.

For despite your sin, despite your rebellion, despite your unfaithfulness, your Father - in love - is calling you back.

Calling you to repentance, that you may not die, but live.

That you receive His life and salvation in the forgiveness of your sins.

And so He is not calling you to try harder, for that would still be believing in and relying on yourself!

He is calling you to repent.

To return to where your life began.

To return to the waters of your baptism in repentance, and be raised again to a new life in forgiveness.

To be raised with Christ who came and *became sin for us* and took our place in death, that we might rise with Him to life, and *be reconciled to God*.

Our sin dividing us no more.

Our sin ruling us no more.
Our sin defeated, that we might live a new life.
For that is the way of it with God.
The way of the cross.
The way not of an *old* life reformed, but of *new* life, through the death and resurrection of His Son.

And it is the only way.
The cross of Christ is the *beginning*, the *end*, the *middle*, and the *means* of our journey through this life and to the next.
For apart from Christ and His cross there is for us death and no life.
But joined to Christ and He to us, then there is life. For that is why Jesus came. *To be sin for us, that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.*
Not because of what *we* have done, but because of what *He* has done.

And so not only tonight, but especially tonight, and beginning again tonight, we return.

We return to the Lord who has turned to us in love.
We return to Him in repentance.
We return to Him in faith.
We return for *now is the favorable time; now is the day of salvation.*
We return for He is here for us.
Here calling you to receive Him and His life-giving, sin-forgiving, body and blood.
Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sin, for the life of the world.
And thus receiving, you live this new life.
Not to *be seen by others*, but to serve others.

And so tonight we return and begin our Lenten journey once again.
Our journey *from* the cross, *through* the cross, and *to* the cross.
That we end where we begin.
That though we will die, yet shall we live.
United to Christ.
Forever.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.