

25 February 2009  
Ash Wednesday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“A Wounded Saviour for a Wounded People”

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

I hate Ash Wednesday.

I hate the ashes.

I hate having them on my forehead and can't wait to wash them off.

I hate putting them on you.

I hate putting them on my wife and children.

I hate the death they represent.

I hate thinking that should God keep me here very long, I'm going to bury many of you.

I hate Ash Wednesday.

Which is, I think, as it should be.

We shouldn't like sin, or the consequences of sin, or the empty promises of sin, or the separation caused by sin, or the hurt caused by sin, or the death caused by sin. Sin and death are not our friends.

The pleasures of sin are small and fleeting - yet its consequence, for us, final.

Death reduces us to what we were never meant to be.

From dust we were *created*; we were not meant to return to it.

God created us for life; sin robs us of that life.

And it is an equal opportunity thief.

Babies die, children die, teens die, young adults die, the middle aged die, the elderly die.

The rich die and the poor die. The strong die and the weak die. The smart die and the foolish die.

Sometimes death comes suddenly, sometimes it is excruciatingly slow and painful.

But it is always sad - at least for us.

But our tears, our hurt, our misery, make satan rejoice.

We should hate Ash Wednesday, because it is about death; it is about our defeat; it is about our failure.

*But that's not all Ash Wednesday is about.*

It is also about the fact that into the midst of our death, our defeat, our sin, our misery and our failure, came Life again.

A Saviour - someone who saves.

**A Saviour to be wounded for a wounded people**, that by His wounds we be

healed. (1 Peter 2:24)

A Saviour who wore not a mere smudge of ashes on His forehead, but a crown of thorns and shame and suffering.

A Saviour to rob the robber of his bounty, and give us back the life that we lost.

A Saviour to pay the price for our sin, **to become sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God.** (2 Corinthians 5:21)

A Saviour to become one with us, that we might be one with Him.

A Saviour who would overcome *in His own body* the separation of God and man caused by sin, and reconcile us to our Father and our Father to us.

A Saviour to transform death with His own death, that death be not the end for us - but now the gate to eternal life. (Psalm 118)

A Saviour promised by God, foreseen by prophets, sung of by angels, touched by sinners, crucified by a Roman governor, and who now in His resurrection from the dead lives and reigns to all eternity.

Who lives and reigns not to condemn the world (John 3:17), but to forgive our sins, give us life, nourish us with His own body and blood, and make us sons of God.

He is a Saviour who hates death even more than we do.

And so who not *just* tonight, but *especially* tonight, calls us to return to Him.

Not just to turn *from* our sin - to give up a tasty treat or a guilty pleasure for a time.

That's not bad. The words of our Lord we heard tonight assume we *will* fast.

**When you fast,** He says (Matthew 6:16). Not *if*.

But that is only part - and a very small part.

Moreso tonight is the call not to give up- to turn *from* - but to return, to turn *to*.

**“Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”** (Joel 2:13)

Turn *to* Him.

Turn in repentance, to receive His forgiveness.

Turn in the midst of dying, to receive His life.

Turn, for He wants not only your obedience - He wants you.

Outside these walls, we are taught to deny our sin. It's not so bad. If it feels good, do it. If it feels good, it must be good.

Outside these walls, we are afraid to be weak. We deny our wounds. We put on a good show.

Outside these walls, there is much I can get away with.

But your Father in heaven sees what you do in secret.

The thought of your minds, the desires of your hearts, that which no one else sees, He sees.

*But He sees also the wounds.* Your wounds.

The wounds that cut so deeply.

The wounds that hurt so much.

The pains, the fears, the doubts, the troubles, the grief.

He sees, and He knows, and He has mercy.

For you do not have a Saviour who doesn't know what you're going through, but who has been through it all.

**A wounded Saviour for a wounded people**, to bind up our wounds, to heal us, and to restore us.

A Saviour to whom we cry tonight not with excuses - but simply: **Lord, have mercy.** For mercy is the very thing He has come to do.

For He knew that on our own we could not come to Him, return to Him, or find Him; so He came to us, returned to us, and found us.

And tonight, especially tonight, He calls out for us to return.

*To Him.*

That we not **lay up for ourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal.** (Matthew 6:19)

That we not make up for ourselves a life on earth, and think we've got something good going on here.

That we not deceive ourselves and settle for what we can do.

But that we receive from Him what we do not have, what no one else can give, and which is found in no one and no place else - life.

Life now, and life eternal.

Life with meaning and purpose.

And so tonight the smudge of ashes on your forehead is in the shape of the cross.

Because there was our Saviour wounded for us.

There was our salvation accomplished.

There the serpent who overcame by a tree was overcome by a tree.

There, more than anywhere else, you see the love of God for you in the face of Jesus Christ.

So hate those ashes, but don't hate the day.

Hate the ashes, and go home and wash them off, and remember your Baptism which washed your sins away.

Your Baptism, when the love of God in the face of Jesus Christ shone on you, and was poured over you, and gave you life.

Life again.

Life from the dead.

Life eternal.

Which is what this night is all about.

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