

22 February 2012
Ash Wednesday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Return”

Text: Joel 2:12-19; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; 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.

Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (Joel 2:13).

One thing that strikes me about God is His patience. We tend to be an impatient people. We want what we want and we want it NOW! But God, Joel tells us, is patient. He is long suffering; He suffers with us, He puts up with us, for a long time. He is ***slow to anger***. He calls out to sinners in His mercy and grace not just once, but time and time again. Sending prophet after prophet, pastor after pastor. And waits for them to return. All this, because He is the Father of us prodigals, ***abounding in steadfast love***, not wanting any to perish, but all to turn from their evil ways and live (Ezekiel 33:11).

But though waiting, our Lord is not idle. He has done everything necessary for our reconciliation. As we heard from St. Paul, ***He made His own Son who knew no sin to be sin*** - to be the sin offering for the sin of the world - ***that in Him***, in Jesus, ***we might become the righteousness of God***. And so St. Paul begs: ***be reconciled to God***. God has done this for you. Come back. Repent, and receive this wonderful forgiveness that is here for you.

That's a word not just *others* need to hear, a message not just those *outside* the church need to hear, a plea that *really bad sinners* need to hear - *but that you and I need to hear*. And so Ash Wednesday.

Oh, it's not as though you fell away from the faith . . . though that happens to Christians. And it's not as though you fell into some really big and awful sin . . . though that happens to Christians, too. And maybe to you. But for most of us gathered here tonight, it's been a much more subtle thing . . . a drifting; a drifting away. Little by little. Which is, perhaps, much more dangerous, because it's so easy to do, and you hardly notice. When you commit a really big sin, a whopper, you know it! But drifting . . . but before you realize it, there can be a whole lot of water between you and the land.

And so Jesus says today, as we heard from St. Matthew: **beware**.

Beware, because it's easy to disregard these words from St. Matthew tonight, for you may not seem to be doing what Jesus warns against here - blowing your own horn and seeking the praise of others. *But beware of drifting*. You may not start out in those places, but how easy it is to wind up there.

You didn't set out to be a hypocrite, but maybe you ended up there, confessing one truth but living quite differently; first, just a little, but then more and more.

You didn't set out to doubt, but maybe you ended up there, worry and anxiety slowly but surely causing you to question your Lord's love and faithfulness.

You didn't set out to seek the approval of the world, but maybe you ended up there, as the praise of others slowly but surely became more and more important to you and your job and your friends and your status and your self-esteem.

You didn't start out to neglect those things that are profitable for your salvation - the study of God's Word, prayer, fasting, almsgiving - but maybe you ended up there, as lack of time or greed or laziness or apathy slowly led you away.

You see, that's the thing: satan may occasionally come against you with a full frontal assault, but more often, I think, is the drift. The currents and pull of this world and life slowly, slowly luring and enticing and leading our hearts away.

And so it's good that the call goes out each year. To wake us from the drift, or from our slumber, perhaps, and see how far we've wandered. To return to the Lord. ***For he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.***

For though we have drifted, He has not. Not in the least. In fact, He is always coming to us, rushing toward us, with His forgiveness, life, and salvation. In His Son. In Jesus. He came to us while we were still far away in our sin. He came to us while we were still enemies. He came to us and redeemed us. The faithful for the faithless. The steadfast for the drifters. He came and remained sure and true, even to the cross. His death for our sins and His resurrection for our justification (Romans 4:25), providing all that we need. Exactly and everything we need.

When the prophet Joel cried out, he said: ***Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him.*** He was speaking of the devastation that had come on the land. Repentance is no guarantee that things will get outwardly better. Your problems will still be there in the morning. The homework you didn't do still won't be done.

But when we return in repentance, it is not *who knows whether He will forgive?* For we have His promise to forgive! That wherever His Word of forgiveness is preached, there is He with His blessing. Wherever the water of baptism is poured out in His Name, there is He with His blessing. Wherever the Body and Blood of His Supper is given in His Name, there is He with His blessing. And not just a little blessing - but the full and free forgiveness of all your sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. That you be reconciled to God. No longer adrift, but one with your Saviour Jesus Christ. For that is why Jesus has come. That is why He calls out still. That He may return us to the Lord our God. That we be joined to Him in His forgiveness, life, and salvation, and He then take us to His Father.

And so have you come here tonight. Some of you felt the grit of the ashes upon your foreheads - a stark reminder that the greatest treasure we have here on earth, our very own lives, will not last. Not moth and rust, but death and decay will overtake us all. But even as you confessed that, you see before your eyes the treasure of heaven come down to earth. Death and decay tried to do their worst to Him, and lost. They were defeated. And so we have a treasure in heaven that no enemy can destroy or take away from us - an everlasting Saviour, who though in heaven, is even here for you. To feed and forgive you, to strengthen and anchor you in His love.

And that - truly - is what Ash Wednesday is all about. The good news that for us weak and dying sinners, there is strength for our weakness, forgiveness for our sin, and life for our death. In Jesus.

Return to the LORD your God, 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.