

13 February 2013
Ash Wednesday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Pure and Holy Lamb of God”

Text: 1 Peter 1:18-19

(Also Joel 2:12-19; 2 Cor. 5:20-6:10; 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.

This Lenten season our meditations will focus on the hymn we just sung: *Lamb of God, Pure and Holy* (LSB #434) and the different phrases used in that hymn that teach us of Christ. Tonight, the phrase we will focus on is *pure and holy*.

Because on Ash Wednesday that is our particular focus: that we are not pure and holy. And that that is not just unfortunate, not something to wink or smirk at when we are naughty, and not something to sweep under the rug with a trite: *Oh, well, we're only human*. As you well know, it is much more serious than that. Our sin, which makes us *impure* and *unholy* is condemning, and if left unforgiven, results in eternal separation from God.

And so it is important to recognize our sin and repent. But it is *even more* important to see *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). To receive the forgiveness of *the pure and holy Lamb of God*, that we who are *impure* and *unholy* be made pure and holy again in the sight of God.

To think on that tonight, to think on this phrase in our hymn, hear these words from the apostle Peter: *Know that you were redeemed from your futile [way of life] inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or spot* (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Now there's a lot in those words, starting with how Peter describes life without Christ - he calls it a *futile way of life*. That could also be translated as an *empty* way of life, or a *vain* way of life. Now, what do those things mean?

A **futile way of life** is like running and getting nowhere. It is why people sometimes call life a “rat race.” It is what causes people to wonder if they and what they're doing with their life really matters. Because sometimes it all seems pointless, futile.

A **vain way of life** would be that, but also include the notion of living *to be seen by others*, to receive their adoration and praise and so make life meaningful. It is what

we heard in the readings tonight - the people in Joel's time who rended their garments but not their hearts, the people in Jesus' day who fasted and prayed and did their good works *to be seen by others*. The perfect expression of that in our TV and internet age is that a person's worth is now measured by their 15 or so minutes of fame, how many Twitter followers or Facebook friends they have, or how many hits their blog or web site or YouTube video gets. These things consuming them in their need *to be seen by others, to mean something*.

And an **empty way of life** . . . the phrase sounds funny because our lives are fuller and busier and more frenzied than ever. Crammed with activities, never enough time, always waking up with 50 things to do and going to bed with 100. Yet in the midst of so much doing, people have never been more lonely, more lost, more empty.

Ever feel that way? Bought into that thinking? Found yourself caught up in that perfect storm? *Who hasn't?* And when the dust settles, the whirlwind stops, and your life ends, that sound you hear is satan laughing, who consumed your life with so many things that he consumed your life.

So what good news Peter has for us! *Know that you were redeemed from your futile [way of life] inherited from your forefathers*. From this kind of life you were redeemed, or *ransomed*. Ransomed is a freedom from bondage, freedom from slavery, word. It means to be set free from the futility, the vanity, the emptiness. To be set free and given something better.

Know that you were redeemed from your futile [way of life] inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such a silver of gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or spot.

You were redeemed. Notice that's passive meaning you didn't do anything for it; you couldn't. We're too busy being caught up in all that other stuff! But exactly because we couldn't, Jesus did. He came to pay the ransom for our freedom, not with dollars and coins, but with His flesh and blood. The pure and holy Lamb of God **without blemish or spot**. The pure and holy Lamb of God **who knew no sin, but became sin for us, that in Him we might become the righteousness of God**. That in Him, we be pure and holy again.

Satan tried to lure Jesus into despair, into vanity, into an empty busyness, but Jesus would not be so soon enticed, He would not be fooled, He would not be so defiled. From start to finish, His life was focused on one thing only: to do the will of His Father. To be the pure and holy Lamb of God. To lay down His life on the cross and pour out His blood for you. His blood which cleanses us from all guilt. His blood which sets you free.

And when you are baptized, you receive that washing of forgiveness and freedom. The ashes of death that mark you as a dead man walking are washed away, and in their place the sign of the cross which marks you as a child of God. A child of God whose life has meaning and purpose. A child of God whose value is not measured by the things of this world but by the fact that your life was worth the life of the Son of God! A child of God not lonely, empty, and lost, but filled with the Holy Spirit and in fellowship with your Father in heaven and your brother Jesus Christ. A child of God no longer a slave to sin, but free in Christ. Free to live in confidence and love.

In confidence and love even when sin and satan and our sinful natures entice us back into those wrong thoughts and deeds from which we have been set free. Even when we've made a rotten mess of our lives. For the love of the Father who gave His Son for you, the Son who came and died for you, and the Spirit who comes and sanctifies you, never ceases and never ends. He bids you repent and return. Or in the words of the prophet Joel: ***Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.***

And that's what Ash Wednesday and this season of Lent is all about. Not that we *only* repent and return now - that is what we as Christians do every day! But a special time is good. To ***consecrate a fast***, to ***call a solemn assembly***, to ***gather the people***. To remember who we are, and to consider *even more* the pure and holy Lamb of God, whose body and blood cleanses us from every sin and unrighteousness, that we be pure and holy again.

So come now in this solemn assembly. Come and receive the pure and holy Lamb of God, His Body and Blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. That your tears of repentance be dried by His forgiveness. That your doubts be calmed by His love. That your hearts be filled with Him. Come, for ***Now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.***

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

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