

1 March 2017
Ash Wednesday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Marked with Death; Marked for Life”
Text: Genesis 3:19; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21;
2 Corinthians 5:21; Joel 2:12-19

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

I didn't know what it meant, at first. I saw a big, beautiful tree marked with an ugly X. The tree, outwardly, looked healthy and strong. But inwardly it was not. To my untrained eyes, everything looked fine. But to the trained eye of the tree expert who had marked it, this tree was diseased and rotten. In fact, I was told, it was probably completely hollow on the inside, and near death. And if not cut down, it would soon fall down.

Today, that's our story. We've been marked. Because while we may look good and healthy, even young and beautiful, on the outside, inwardly the truth is quite different. We are rotten with sin. We are dying. The words we heard today said that, too. *Dust you are, and to dust you will return.* But we could say it better. That makes it sound as if the returning is sometime off in the future. But the reality is that the returning is happening even now. Just like with that tree. The disease is doing its awful work now. *Dust you are, and to dust you are returning.* That's more accurate. Each day that goes by, we dry up a little more. We are a little more dust. We are a little weaker, a little more rotten.

And that would be true even if we were not marked. Not everyone received ashes tonight, and we'll all wash them off either tonight or tomorrow. But the rottenness of sin is the same and remains. And that is true no matter how good we try to make ourselves look on the outside; no matter how much we want others to think we're not so diseased and rotten. Maybe if they can see how serious I am in spiritual matters. If they can see how much I give. If they can see my fervent prayers. Yet maybe it's not only others we want to see and convince . . . maybe I am also trying to convince myself. And maybe, just maybe, God, too.

But such people Jesus calls hypocrites. It's not wrong to do those things, just to do them to impress. That's what makes one a hypocrite - a pretender, a deceiver. And while we may get the reward of others thinking well of us, that's like me admiring the beauty of the diseased tree without knowing the reality that lies within. But the reality is still there. In us. And the expert, our Creator, knows it.

So instead of trying to practice our own righteousness before others - which really isn't

righteousness at all - better to receive a *real* righteousness, a real rightness, a real healing. Which is what we receive, St. Paul said, through Jesus. The one who *knew no sin*, but *for our sake* was *made to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*.

You will receive that righteousness as you come forward here, tonight, again, and this time, instead of being marked as one diseased, you will receive the Body and Blood of the one who was cut down for your sin, and then raised from the dead. Raised for your righteousness. And you will receive Him because He marked you as His own when He baptized you and marked you with the sign of His cross. And it is that water that truly washes off the mark of our disease and heals us - not only in appearance, but from the inside out. That water gives the life of forgiveness to those who are returning to dust. A life then fed with His Body and Blood. *Water, blood, and Spirit testifying to the One who has come with life, with life for all* (LSB #597).

So we come here tonight to repent; to enter into this season of repentance; to acknowledge our sinful rottenness and our rotten sinfulness. And we're marked. But more than that, we leave with much more than a mark - but with righteousness. A righteousness which isn't ours, but is given to us. Because Jesus is given to us. The one who takes our sin and gives us Himself. The one who, as the prophet Joel said, *is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love*. The one who, as we sang, comes to us with a *love unknown. With love for the loveless, that we might lovely be* (LSB #430).

So you've been marked: marked with death, but marked for life. And while in this world death has the last word, it will not always be so. For while this season of Lent will end with death on Good Friday, that death will itself be ended with life, with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. And that's how your death will end as well. With life. Jesus' life. Given to you.

So tonight is a solemn night, but not a somber one. We repent, yes, but are happy to do so. Because here is the forgiveness we need, here is the life we need, here is the righteousness we need. For here is the Jesus we need. And you the sinners He wants.

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