

21 March 2018
Lent 5 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church

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“Return to the Lord . . . Who Does Not Tire of Calling You”

Text: Amos 4:6-13; Luke 20:9-18

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

Our Lord is relentless. He does not give up. He is tireless in calling you to repentance. Because He wants to forgive. To forgive before judgment takes place. **Prepare to meet your God!** Amos said tonight. But how? By repenting. For when you repent, you meet a merciful God. When you do not repent, but insist upon your own righteousness, you meet a merciless God. A God who will judge you as you want to be judged. But God doesn't want that. Because He knows how such a judgment will turn out. He is a God of mercy, a God who wants to be merciful and gracious, who is a Redeemer and a Restorer. And so He calls and calls and calls. In fact, your God is a beggar - begging you to accept His mercy and love.

That offends some people, calling God a beggar. For surely that's beneath God! God does not beg. God is glorious, high, and mighty! And He surely is. But He is also the God who comes to you as a beggar and as a servant, to save you. That's who your God is.

But if you never thought of God like that before, the reading from Amos that we heard should convince you. There is no mistake about it. The Lord is calling and calling His people, working to get their attention and bring them back to Him. And yet over and over we hear these sad words: **yet you did not return to me.**

Amos chronicles all that God did to call His people back to Him in repentance. First, He says, His gave his people **cleanness of teeth**. Which sounds funny. But it isn't. Teeth are clean when they have no food to dirty them; no food to get stuck between them. It is the Lord who provides our daily bread, and so when we turn away from Him, we deserve to lose our daily bread. But God doesn't take it away in vengeance, but so that the people remember Him and turn back to Him as the giver of all good gifts. **Yet you did not return to me . . .**

And so next the Lord **withheld the rain** from them. Rain, because throughout Israel's history, the people were constantly tempted to worship and trust in the god of their neighbors, named Baal. Baal, it was believed, was the god of the sky, of lightning, and of **rain**. So if the people want to trust in Baal for the rain they need, let's see how much rain Baal provides! And the answer, of course, is none. A false god can produce and provide nothing. So return to the God who can! **Yet you did not return to me . . .**

A third time the Lord tries, sending the devastation of blight, mildew, and locust. When the Lord brought His people into the Promised Land, He gave them an abundance of everything, and a land that had everything. It was a land flowing with milk and honey! Why leave the God who provides such good gifts? So the Lord takes them away, that the people return to Him and ask Him. *Yet you did not return to me . . .*

But how merciful the Lord is! Still He does not give up on His people. Still He calls to them and works to bring them back to Himself. This time sending *pestilence after the manner of Egypt*. That means that He did to them as He had done to Egypt, to remind them of what He did in the past, what He had done to Egypt to set His people free from their slavery and bring them out. He sent plagues among the Egyptians and Pharaoh and his army were swept away in the Red Sea. Remember? Remember how I did that all for you, God says? How I am a faithful God, who keeps my promises! Return to me. *Yet you did not return to me . . .*

So the Lord does it again - another historical reminder, this time of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, when God destroyed them because of their evil. *I overthrew some of you* like that, God says through Amos. Open your eyes to see the evil you are doing. Open your mouths to repent. And open your hearts to receive my forgiveness and love! *Yet you did not return to me . . .*

Is this not amazing? The incessant, relentless love of God? And isn't it striking? How thick and dull and ignorant and unseeing the people are! *What's wrong with them?* we might ask.

Well, the same thing that wrong with us. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that these things in the Old Testament were written for our learning, to instruct us, that we do not make the same mistakes (1 Corinthians 10:6). *But have we learned?*

How is the Lord working in your life? Calling to you, calling you to repent and return to Him? To not fear the things of this world more than Him. To not love the things of this world more than Him? To not trust the things of this world more than Him. But we do, don't we?

Fearing . . . fearing suffering, fearing death, fearing disease, fearing the words and opinions of others, fearing the future . . . fearing all this more than the God who controls all of it and can see to it all for us.

And **loving** . . . loving our stuff, loving control, loving power, loving security, loving ease, loving what we have achieved, loving honor, loving praise . . . and loving all this more than the God who gives it and provides it.

And then **trusting** . . . trusting ourselves, trusting what we can accomplish, trusting our desires, trusting the people of this world, trusting our savings and investments, trusting knowledge, trusting power and might . . . trusting all this more than the God who is our refuge and strength.

Now certainly, God gives us great blessings in the people and things He gives us, and He uses them to bless us. But how easily they can turn into Baals for us; false gods that we turn to instead of the God who gave them.

So often we think our sin little and inconsequential compared to the sins of others, but it's not. All sin, every sin, is a turning away from God, a breaking of the very first commandment. Yes, we have much to repent of, too.

You did not return to me . . . Let us learn from Amos, that that may not ever be said of us.

Martin Luther wrote 95 theses, and the very first one said this: *When our Lord and Master Jesus said repent, he willed that the entire life of the believer be one of repentance.* That not just once in a while, but that our whole life be a constant turning away from ourselves and a turning to God, and looking to Him for our forgiveness, our life, and every good thing. For that is all He wants to do - give us every good thing we need.

We heard that in the reading from Luke tonight as well. God sending servant after servant after servant to His people, and they beating and stoning and killing them. Until finally He sent His Son. ***Yet they did not return to me . . .*** They beat and killed Him, Jesus, too.

But that too was God's good working. For the Father did not just send His Son to call us to repentance, but to take our beating and death for us, in our place. The judgment of God we deserve, meted out on Him. That we look at the Son and see our sin. That we look at the Son and see our salvation. That we look at the Son and repent. That we look at the Son and receive His forgiveness. That we look at the Son on the cross and ***meet our God***, and return to Him there.

Return to the Lord who, as we have learned this Lenten season, is gracious and merciful, who has redeemed us, who has restored us, who will raise us up, who does not change, and who does not tire of calling us. That's quite a God. And He is yours, and you are His.

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