

6 March 2019  
Ash Wednesday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Reset. Restart. Repent.”

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.

When your cell phone, or your computer, or your tablet, or your internet, or whatever electronic device you're using, isn't working right, the first thing technical support will tell you to do is to reset it, or even better, to restart it.

Well, what do you do when what isn't working right isn't a piece of electronics, but a person? You can't reset or restart - instead, you repent. So that's what we're doing tonight. Because we don't work right. We sin. We confessed the many different ways we do so earlier. But there's more. Much more. A thousand times more reasons we sin. None of them good reasons, though, try as we might to make them sound good and reasonable, and like we couldn't help it. And while your excuses might fool others, your not fooling yourself, and you can't fool God.

The people in Joel's day had to learn that the hard way. Enduring a locust plague which pretty much wiped out all they had - all they loved and trusted more than God. So God took it away, that they would love and trust Him instead. And then He sent the prophet Joel to tell them to repent. ***Return to the Lord your God.*** Reset your faith. Repent.

Joel told them *how* - with ***fasting, weeping, and mourning; rending your hearts and not your garments.*** To stop clinging to the wrong things, the things of this world, and start clinging to God.

Joel told them *who* - ***elders, children, even nursing infants;*** newlyweds, ***priests, ministers,*** everyone, the whole congregation, no one excepted. No one above repentance or not in need of it.

Joel told them *where* - ***between the vestibule and the altar;*** or in other words, in church. For that is where our Lord has promised to be for us, with His forgiveness and life.

And Joel told them *why* - because the Lord ***is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.***

So they did. And then we read that ***the Lord had pity on His people.*** He was merciful.

God disciplines His people, punishes them (us!) because He loves us - but that's not who He is and what He wants to do. He wants to bless and give. The problem is we don't always want to receive. That's how sin much has messed us up. And why we need to repent - to receive again what our Lord wants to give: *forgiveness*.

And as the Lord was merciful to the people of Joel's day, so He is tonight, here, for us. For the season of Lent isn't about trying to *earn* God's forgiveness by what we do or what we give up - *it's about receiving the gift and rejoicing in it*.

The people in Joel's day had to ask: ***Who know whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him.*** They had to ask that because God was punishing them, discipling them, and that might not be done yet. But it's not a question we have to ask about *forgiveness* - that we know! Because God has promised to forgive all who repent and trust in Him; all who believe His Word and His promise of a Saviour. The promise He fulfilled in Jesus.

The promise Paul was talking about in calling the Corinthian church to repent - to be ***reconciled to God***, was how he put it. That *for our sake God the Father made Jesus, who knew no sin, to be sin, that in Jesus, we might become the righteousness of God*. It's like he's grabbing the Corinthians by their shirts and saying: *Did you hear what I said?* He became the sinner, and we become the righteous ones. He is punished, that we be forgiven. He dies, that we live. ***Don't receive this grace in vain!*** For nothing . . .

How does one do that? Receive the grace of God in vain?

Well, for one, by receiving the grace and forgiveness of God and then going out and sinning, as if nothing had happened and you hadn't received anything of any use. That's receiving in vain.

Or, by thinking that the grace of God means receiving forgiveness *so that* you can go back out and sin more and all you want. That's receiving in vain.

Or, when you act as if forgiveness is not a gift at all; that you still must earn God's favor; that you have to win your way back into His good graces. That's not what it's all about. That's not thinking right, acting right. But we do those things, all those things, at times, don't we? Perhaps that's what we need to repent of most this Ash Wednesday: *what we have done with the grace we have received from God*.

And I think that last one is a particular temptation every Lenten season - to think that this is a season to do something for God. That God will like us more or forgive us more if we pray more, give more, and fast. But really, how could God forgive us more? How could God love us more? He already gave His Son for us! He already atoned for the sins of all the world! Your sins have been washed away in baptism. What more do you think there

is? Or that your measly efforts could induce God to give? But it's how we often think, isn't it?

And then maybe we do also want others to see us, as we heard in the reading from Matthew - that they'll think more of us too.

So reset, restart, repent. And think this way instead . . . and I'll use fasting as an example here. Why fast? If we're not doing something for God, *why fast?*

Well, most of you, if not all of you, do fast . . . on another occasion . . . and that's Thanksgiving. Oh, not at the main feast, but before it. Because you know the big feast, the main event, is coming. So you perhaps skip lunch or eat a smaller lunch - not to earn the feast, but because you don't want to fill up and ruin the feast. And when you do that, you don't look all sad and gloomy - you're happy, because you know what's coming! And it's going to be great.

Think of your Lenten discipline that way. *Why do we give alms?* Not to be seen by other people or earn God's approval - but because we know we have treasure in heaven that is far greater than anything we have here! And our Father will provide all that we need. He promised.

*And why do we pray?* Not to be seen by others or earn God's approval - but because we have a Father who has promised to hear us and answer our prayers. And there are so many who need our prayers. At Thanksgiving, the whole family gets together, and we get together with our Father in prayer.

And your Father rewards you. Not because of what you do, but because when you do these things in this way, your faith is in the right place. It's not in yourself or in others, but in your Father in heaven. Because you are trusting His Word and promises. We know what's coming. And it's going to be great.

But for all our wrong thinking and wrong doing, and our failure to do, each year the call goes out: reset, restart, repent. ***Fix your eyes on Jesus***, we sang in the Gradual. The Jesus on the cross, dying for your sins. The Jesus on the altar in the Bread and Wine, for the forgiveness of your sins. And the Jesus who has promised to return in glory; to return for you and all who believe. And then the Feast will begin. The Feast that has no end. Fix your eyes on that, and the things of this world, the admiration of this world, the trials and troubles of this world, will no longer seem so big or important.

So we begin this penitential season tonight. And it's good to do so each year. To reset, restart, repent. To confess how we have messed up. To receive our Lord's forgiveness and rejoice in it. And to look forward to the Feast that's coming - both the one coming in 40 days, and the one that has no end.

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