

17 February 2010
Ash Wednesday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Return in Joy”

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.

Doesn't it seem strange to say those words of the prophet Joel to a church full of faithful, baptized Christians? ***Return to the Lord your God?*** Maybe say that to the folks who haven't been here in a while, or to those folks who haven't darkened the door of a church for some years, but to those who are here every week? To those who have even come out in the middle of the week for a special service, some of whom have submitted to the humiliation of having ashes scratched upon their foreheads? Are these words really for you?

Yes.

For in truth, you have wandered from the Lord your God. Little by little, you've become more at home in the world and comfortable with the ways of the world. More and more, you've become self-reliant and tried to control the things of your life. Day by day, your focus has shifted from God and from others, and you've made yourself the center of your own little universe, laying up for yourself treasures on earth. I know that has happened to you, for it has happened to me. For how easy it is to wander from the Lord - to forget His Word and truth, to take His love and forgiveness for granted, to make yourself the king and Lord of your life.

And so each year, the prophet Joel calls to us: ***Return to the Lord your God.*** And yet it is not really Joel calling to you, but the Lord Himself through Joel. ***For he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.***

You see, that's what Ash Wednesday is all about. It is about our sin, yes. It is about *dust you are, and to dust you will return*, yes. It is about sorrow and repentance, yes. **But even more**, it is about our gracious and merciful Lord calling out to sinners, calling us to return. And if you've ever been lost, you know how comforting it is to hear someone call out your name! To know there is someone looking for you, and who wants you back. Tonight, your Lord is calling to you. Return. Return.

But *how* do we return? Is there a 12 step program? A method for self-improvement? A process for getting better at the Christian life? No, it is none of those things. The way of return is the way of the cross.

For the cross is where we find the Lord of life, giving His life, to give you life. The cross is where our wandering sins were nailed down as Jesus bore them for us. The cross is where Jesus ***became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him***. And so the cross is where our death bit the dust and we were reconciled to God. For there Jesus said: *Father, forgive them*, and, for Jesus' sake, He does. And so we return not to an angry, offended God, but to a loving God, who is gracious and merciful. To the Father whose arms are open wide to embrace you in His love and forgiveness. To the Son, who loved you so much that He was willing to come and be your sin offering. And to the Spirit who now fills your life with the life of God, and who opens your ears to hear His call.

All of which makes tonight, Ash Wednesday, and all the season of Lent, a solemn time, but not a gloomy time. A serious time that is, at the same time, a joyous time. For it is a time to run back to our Father, and find our home in His arms. We do that every week, certainly, as we gather here, but in Lent, even more so. For in Lent, we get to spend not just a few moments, or an hour, in reflection and repentance, but a whole season, a whole 40 days, to breathe *in* the Word and Spirit, and sweep *out* the dust and cobwebs of sin that have been growing and accumulating and encrusting in the corners of our hearts. To revel in the forgiveness that climaxes in Holy Week, and to rejoice in our salvation - that we are not only saved *from* sin, but saved *for* life. Life now, and life forever.

And that is why the church has traditionally focused on three things during the Lenten season - the three things we heard of from Jesus tonight: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. We do those things not to do something for God; not to pay for our sins; and not to show others that we're really good Christians. No, we do those things to help us sweep out our hearts, and to focus us on living life not in sin, but in Christ. For fasting is about the denial of our appetites and cravings. Prayer is about the denial of our sense of power and control. And almsgiving is about the denial of our false notion that we are self-sufficient and don't need others. And so through fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, we take our eyes off of ourselves and fix them again on Jesus and on others. To teach me that life is not about me. To teach me that life is not about laying up for myself treasures on earth. To teach me that man does not live by bread alone. To teach me not to live a life that will end in death, but to die a death that will end in life. The life of Christ, that will never end.

That life is here for you tonight, for Christ is here for you tonight, to feed you with His body and blood. Come and return, to the Lord your God. Tonight, and all this

season, and all your life. Return, for ***now is the favorable time; now is the day of salvation.*** Return, for He ***is abounding in steadfast love.*** Return, for here is your heavenly treasure, come down for you.

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