

Homily for Ash Wednesday

'Why should they say among the nations, "Where is their God?"'

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Where is our God? In this world filled with strife, both great and petty, we ask this. He cannot be seen. Sometimes it seems that not even His hand, His work can be seen, for this life seems like little more than an endless chaos that we simple humans try to beat back bit by bit; a falling night with no promise of morning against which we stoke fires, knowing that eventually the fuel for our fires will fail.

The atheist asks mockingly 'If there is a God, why can I not see Him?' Little does the atheist know that he is asking a question at the root of Christianity. *Where is their God?*

Sometimes we blush at the question since we are not sure how to answer. The more smugly well-read may shrug off the question by responding with a proof of the invisibility of God argued by St. Thomas Aquinas. But in both cases, the Christian is left with a certain disquiet, for we all feel this absence of God, we neither see Him, nor feel Him, nor sense His will in our lives.

But why should it be otherwise? We chose this life.

In my youth, I recall that when the American army had driven out the Taliban, one could see in the news pictures of joyous Afghans dancing in the street with their thumbs stained purple, a sign that they had voted, the only vote any of them had cast in their life. The first time they chose who would rule over them, what their way of life would be.

Yet every Ash Wednesday, as every pastor in every old church places ashes upon the forehead of the pious, his thumb too is stained, yet not in glorious purple, the color of emperors, but in black, the tint of death. Sometimes, it may take days for the ashen gray to finally wash off.

It is proper that a pastor, a priest, one who represents the people of God, be stained black, for in Adam, and in every day of our lives, by every sin and thoughtless intent, by each petty and malicious thought, we cast a vote; in fact, we cast the same vote, we make the same choice that our first parents made in the Garden of Eden, about who would rule over us, and what our way of life would be.

It would not be a life lived alongside God in the garden, conversing with Him even *as a friend*. It would be a life listening to the whisperings of a serpent, hearing his temptations, bowing down to his idols as our rulers. No longer would we *see God and live*, as Adam did in the garden. Rather our minds would be filled with the chatter of Satan and his flattery. God would be nowhere to be found, but Satan would become our day to day life, for instead of knowing only God, as was intended when we were created, we would know exactly what we chose to know, *good and evil*. For in knowing good, we would know our guilt in not fulfilling it, and in knowing evil, we would seek after everything our Lord warns against in the Gospel: a righteousness practiced only for human praise; prayer offered only for the inward feeling of godliness; and restraint exercised over ourselves only to reveal others' lack of restraint, little more than bragging clothed in fine linen.

In this we found only chaos and lawlessness, the same lawlessness found in Cain when he murdered his brother Abel, and now we only pride ourselves in how well we can be less wicked, not on how we can be more like God, *for none is good but God*.

This is our way of life, and having cast our vote for a godless world, we danced, even as sin stained our soul more and more.

And it could not be otherwise. We chose this life.

In the time of Cain, if one asked 'where is your God', there was an honest answer: 'we left Him.'

A time is coming when the incarnate Lord will mount a cross that we made for Him, to punish Him for having dared come seeking after us, *as a shepherd leaving the ninety-nine for the one*.

And then, if one asked 'where is your God?' there again will be an honest answer:

'we killed Him.'

We have become the greatest of atheists, for it was not enough for us to merely forget God, to not worship Him, to disbelieve in Him. No; we must murder the Lord of Glory, lest He take back to Himself this life we chose.

Yet in the distant, dank, aging words of the prophets, bound in dusty Bibles around the world, these words even now speak; these words of the murdered God: *'Return to me with all your heart.'*

We who cannot see God, who have become slaves to the serpent; now we have no choice; no choice but to hear the Lord as He today speaks to us in His holy and eternal Word.

We have no choice but to fast, to pray, to seek forgiveness, and throw ourselves before the throne of mercy, that even murderers such as us might have redemption, for there is no alternative.

Having committed such great sin; having chosen such evil; *who knows if whether the Lord will not turn and relent? Will His wrath burn against us forever? Or will He speak to us tenderly?*

'Who knows if he will relent?'

But the eternal Word still whispers our God's deepest desire:

'Return to me with all your heart.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Joel 2:12-19; 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21.