

Sermon for Ash Wednesday

“Return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning... Return to the LORD, your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” (Joel 2:12-13)

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Noah spent 40 days in terror and darkness on the ark as he was delivered through death to new life in a new world. The people of God spent 40 years in the wilderness making their way toward the Land of Promise. Jesus Himself spent 40 days in the wilderness battling Satan and his wicked temptations. And so it is fitting that we should associate these 40 days of Lent with a time of darkness and wrath caused by our sin, a time of ongoing trial and temptation at the hand of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh, and, perhaps most importantly, as a time of deliverance from the wrath and death we have deserved back to the forgiveness, new life, and salvation that is ours in Christ.

In this way, Lent might be thought of as a journey - not so much a journey *toward* something, but a journey BACK... BACK to your Baptism - BACK to the new life Jesus purchased on the cross and poured out for you there - BACK to the promise of Eden restored and new life in the resurrection.

It is a journey, of course, that requires you to leave behind all that seems so dear to your old Adam in this world - a journey that requires you to steer clear of all those places in the valley of the shadow of death that look so interesting, and to avoid or remove all those obstacles that stand between you and your destination. Which is to say, it is a journey marked by fasting - the elimination - the removal of all that represents a relapse into the selfishness and indifference of the old Christ-less life.”

Understood in this way, then, the basic purpose of Lent is to prepare for the rising to newness of life at Easter. Originally set aside by the Church as the time of preparation leading to Baptism - a time of fasting, prayer, almsgiving, and devotion to God's Word that would become the marks of new life among the Baptized, it is to this day a time to examine *ourselves* to "discover those attitudes, practices, and bad habits that no longer conform with

this new life to which we have been born through the Holy Waters. Indeed, if the truth be told, we spend our time gratifying every hunger, thirst, and desire of our sinful flesh without a thought about how gratifying these desires has become the meaning and purpose of our lives. We concern ourselves with filling our storehouses and coffers so that we actually hold back giving to those in need. We devote our time and attention to work, play, and sleep giving little or no attention to prayer or time in God's Word - which is why we take our places in this solemn assembly again today - NOT to work our way back into God's favor, but because God has graciously called us back to the life He has already

given! We enter into this Season of Lent in repentance to put out of our lives all that remains of the old life or has crept in once more.

Thought of this way, Lent becomes a journey from the font to the altar and back to the font again - from the baptismal life we forsake by our sin to the altar of Christ's forgiveness, and through that forgiveness, back to the fullness of new life that was given us in our Baptism. It is the journey that begins anew with the mark you bear on your brow today - the mark of ashes that identifies who you are in sin, and the mark of the cross that identifies who you are in Christ. For you were dead in your trespasses and sins, but now you are alive in Christ.

And so, the Holy Spirit graciously calls and gathers you to this solemn assembly again today.

He sends forth the invitation, "Return to the Lord with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning... Return to the LORD, your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Rend your hearts, and not your garments" (Joel 2:12-13).

Lift up your hearts unto the Lord that He may create in you

a clean heart and a right spirit within you. Take up the fast and turn from those temptations and obstacles and treasures where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. Take up the challenge over against the devil and your old Adam by taking up fasting, prayer, almsgiving, and renewed devotion to God's Word.

Put away whatever may interfere with or distract you from your new life with the risen Christ (Lindemann) - not as a got-to, but as a *get-to* - not for the purpose of "keeping Lent" like the hypocrites do, but for the purpose of freedom from all that has enslaved you - not that you may be seen by others, but that you may be seen by your Father who is in heaven and receive the reward He has promised. For the LORD himself has declared, "Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil" - Grain and wine: Bread and Wine, Body and Blood! Oil: Anointing and Baptism! - the gifts of Christ crucified and risen for your forgiveness, life, and salvation. "Behold," says the LORD, "I am sending to you all that you need, and you will be satisfied" (Joel 2:19).

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Preached by Pastor Holowach

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