

**The Old Testament: Joel 2:1-2,12-17**

Reader: A Reading from the Book of Joel

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come. Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord, your God? Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep. Let them say, “Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

Reader: The Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

**The Epistle: II Corinthians 5:20b–6:10**

Reader: A Reading from the Second Letter of Paul to the  
Corinthians.

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Reader: The Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

**The Holy Gospel: Matthew 6:1-6,16-21**

Jesus said, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Psalm 103

1 Bless the Lord, O my soul, \*  
and all that is within me, bless his holy Name. 2 Bless the Lord, O my  
soul, \* and forget not all his benefits. 3 He forgives all your  
sins \* and heals all your infirmities;  
4 *He redeems your life from the grave \* and crowns you with mercy  
and loving-kindness; 5 He satisfies you with good things, \* and your  
youth is renewed like an eagle's. 6 The Lord executes righteousness \* and  
judgment for all who are oppressed. 7 He made his ways known to Moses \*  
and his works to the children of Israel. 8 The Lord is full of compassion and  
mercy, \* slow to anger and of great kindness. 9 He will not always  
accuse us, \* nor will he keep his anger for ever. 10 He has not dealt with us  
according to our sins, \* nor rewarded us according to our wickedness. 11  
For as the heavens are high above the earth, \* so is his mercy great upon  
those who fear him. 12 As far as the east is from the west, \* so far has he  
removed our sins from us. 13 As a father cares for his children, \* so does the  
Lord care for those who fear him. 14 For he himself knows whereof we are made; \*  
he remembers that we are but dust. 15 Our days are like the grass; \*  
we flourish like a flower of the field; 16 When the wind goes over it, it is  
gone, \* and its place shall know it no more. 17 But the merciful goodness of  
the Lord endures for ever on those who fear him, \* and his righteousness  
on children's children; 18 On those who keep his covenant \* and remember  
his commandments and do them. 19 The Lord has set his throne in heaven, \*  
and his kingship has dominion over all. 20 Bless the Lord, you angels of his,  
you mighty ones who do his bidding, \* and hearken to the voice of his word.  
21 Bless the Lord, all you his hosts, \* you ministers of his who do  
his will. 22 Bless the Lord, all you works of his, in all places of his dominion; \*  
bless the Lord, O my soul.*

Ash Wednesday—Years A, B, C

Welcome to our church on this first day of Lent. Today the Liturgy presents a challenge to Christian people. It confronts us with the radical change in living which is the Way of Christ.

We are faced with sin and salvation as alternative directions for our lives: sin as separation from God, from others, from our selves and from the natural world; salvation as reconciliation with God, others, our selves, and the natural world.

The Liturgy on Ash Wednesday is reduced to its primary elements of Word and Sacrament. We are called to consider our mortality and in that context our sin and our absolute dependence upon God for salvation and for life.

We may be tempted to limit our concerns to our sins and our mortality, letting the ashes be the most important thing in our worship today. But we use the ashes simply as the starting point for that which is far deeper and ultimately more important: salvation. The ashes, the penitence, the fasting: all of these are but means toward the goal of Ash Wednesday, of Lent, indeed, of all Christian living; namely, repentance, new life, and ministry to others.

[When using Joel] “Be reconciled to God...” Paul tells us. Repentance, says the prophet Joel, opens us to the discovery of God’s love and mercy. Make your prayer, fasting, and ministry the mark of an inner and fundamental way of living day in and day out, the Lord says.

[Or when using Isaiah as the first reading] “Be reconciled to God...” Paul tells us. Make you prayer, fasting, and ministry the marks of an inner and fundamental way of living day in and day out, says the Lord. In his teaching about fasting, Jesus echoes the message Isaiah had given to Israel centuries earlier.

“Remember, you are dust and to dust you shall return,” is turned around into, “you shall have life, and you shall have it abundantly.”

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