

Sermon: Ash Wednesday

Text: Joel 2:12-19 (vv. 12,13)

Theme: Return to the Lord!

Goal: To assure that God is always willing to accept the repented sinner on behalf of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross

Dear Friends,

Introduction: Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, a 40-day season from now to Good Friday and Easter. It is characterized (in some churches more than in others) by fasting, quiet moments, special Bible readings, no noise, black and dark coloured clothes... These are external signs of repentance and of mourning Jesus' suffering and death. But these external signs don't have any value if repentance doesn't happen in the hearts. Luther didn't despise these external signs, but he wrote at the explanation of the Lord's Supper: *Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training. But that person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."* (Small Catechism).

Some look forward to Good Friday, focusing Lent on repentance and mourning only. But without Easter, we don't have hope and forgiveness. We have to maintain the right balance. Our text calls us to true repentance, but assures God's compassion and grace to us: "Return to the Lord you God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love." The call to repentance is based on God's compassion and grace. This is Lent: Through the suffering and death of Jesus we come with Him to the glory of Easter and to the assurance of our forgiveness and new life.

I – Joel’s time

When Prophet Joel wrote this text, the people had suffered a massive locust plague and severe drought devastation (CSSB). He saw this as God’s judgment upon the sins of his people and as a reminder that the Day of the Lord is near. Therefore he calls people to true repentance and faith. They shouldn’t just rend their garments, as it was used to do that time as an external sign of lament, mourning and repentance; but they should rend their hearts in true repentance, returning from their wrong way to God and to His paths. He calls everyone: elders, children, even infants, bride and groom to come together in a sacred assembly, with fasting, weeping and mourning to confess their sins and to pray for mercy and forgiveness in true faith. The priest, who ministered before the Lord, should be the first to weep and to say: “Spare your people, o Lord!”

II – Lent time

We don’t need to wait till a big calamity affects us to return to God with fasting, weeping and mourning. We don’t need to wait till God disciplines us (Hebrews 12:5-11) to acknowledge our dependence of God. We don’t need to eat the pods that the pigs were eating, like the Prodigal Son experienced it before he came back to the Father’s house (Luke 15:16). We return to God every day when we confess our sins and ask for forgiveness; we return to God every Sunday when we come humble and repented to God’s house, beginning our Service with Confession and Absolution; we return to God when we kneel at the Holy Communion, looking for God’s mercy in the Body and Blood of Jesus; we return to God in a very special way at Lent time, when we have this Ash Wednesday Service and the Lent Services, following a special Order of Service without singing Glorias and Alleluias. But we need to be aware that this is not just a ritual, but our repentance

must be sincere and that we are really turning from our bad behaviour to the path of light and righteousness of our God. This is a daily struggle!

God restored His people at Joel's time and gave them again good harvest, grain, new wine and oil. This was an external sign of God's grace upon His people. The prophet contorted his people saying: "Surely God has done great things. Be not afraid, o land; be glad and rejoice. Surely the Lord has done great things" (v.20,21).

We complain that things could be better in our land. But, on the other hand, we have our daily bread – grain, wine, oil - in abundance and we thank God for this. God has been very gracious to us. Maybe we don't have everything we want, but we have everything we need.

III - God is gracious

God's mercy and compassion is the highlight of Joel's message. If on the one hand people had suffered a lot and the prophet called people to true repentance, on the other hand he presents God's mercy and compassion as the reason for the restoration: "Return to the Lord you God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love." This message *runs like a golden thread through the Old Testament* (CSSB).

God is a God of justice who judges sin; but He is also a God of compassion and mercy. Because of His justice, He had to punish sinners and He chose to do it through His Son Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We will follow the paths of Jesus to the cross during Lent. But God also showed His mercy and compassion when He raised Jesus from the death and proclaimed through Him forgiveness and life to all who believe. Trusting in God's mercy through Jesus we can approach His throne with confidence, as

the Book of Hebrews says: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most holy Place by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from the guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

When God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai, he shouted: “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow in anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exodus 34:6,7). - At the end of his life, Moses recalled that experience and assured the people: “When you are in distress...then in later days you will return to the Lord your God and obey him. For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you and forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath (Deuteronomy 4:31,31). – Prophet Micah prayed in confidence to God on behalf of his people: “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever, but delight to show mercy. You will have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea” (Micah 7:18,19).

Conclusion: Lent is not a season to depress us, but to remind us how much it cost for our Saviour to pay for our sins; and to lift up our eyes to the empty cross and to the empty tomb – this means: to the living Christ, full of mercy and compassion, who wants to lead us through this valley of tears to the abundance of His glory. In Him we trust for forgiveness and on Him we rely for guidance in our life. Amen.