

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Ash Wednesday – February 14, 2024
Joel 2:12-19 – Return to the Lord
Rev Peter Wagner

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

“Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.”

Return. Wake up from spiritual slumber, and repent! Turn from the sins of your youth, and repent! Return, old and young, children and nursing babies, turn to God and repent!

Our sins are as scarlet. Like crimson bloodstains, God sees them all. For our many transgressions we should perish in the dust. And perish we will, if we do not repent.

How slow our God is to anger, how abounding in steadfast love. Look how he withholds his wrath from us. All our lives, he has shown mercy. How much longer will he delay? How much longer will he be gracious, if we do not repent?

God was patient with Israel for centuries. He sent many prophets, but at last, his anger was kindled. He sent the Babylonians and Assyrians. He destroyed their cities, and drove them out. God is patient, but at last there comes a time to pour out the cup of his wrath.

So proclaim a fast, says Joel. “Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep and say, “Spare your people, O LORD, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations.””

“Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber.” Even on Valentine’s Day, let husbands and wives postpone their dates, and come to church to put on ashes. Tonight on the anniversary of the martyrdom of Saint Valentine, which our society has reduced to sentimentality like all the other holy days, let every Christian pause and remember that we are dust.

Return to the Lord your God, people of Latimer. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him? Return to the Lord your God, America. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him?

Surely, disasters are coming. Our Lord foretold them. Wars and rumors of wars, famines and plagues. Covid was only the beginning of the birth pangs. So repent, America, of perverting justice and mocking God. Repent of killing babies and honoring sexual perversion. Perhaps our God will withdraw his hand. As he did for Ninevah. “Yet forty days and Ninevah will be overthrown,” but then they believed Jonah’s words. They put on sackcloth and ashes, and were spared.

So proclaim a fast. Fasting from food and gluttony is good spiritual discipline. Hunger is the sharpest wake-up call. Ashes teach that we must die, hunger teaches that we cannot survive apart from God’s grace. It reminds us of all the ways our God has filled us with good things from the day of our birth. So do not fast to win the applause of men, but fast before God, to learn to turn away from all other gods, and turn back to him.

And proclaim a fast from all that leads to temptation. If alcohol is a temptation, put it away. If wasting money is a temptation, re-evaluate your spending. Put away foolish talk, coarse jesting, crude movies and shows. Get away from people who enjoy these things. As for cell phones and the internet, remember what our Lord taught us. “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.” How much easier, if your cell phone causes you to sin, to throw it away and rid it from your life. Or if a website or app causes you to sin, delete your account and move on. Flee from temptation.

And proclaim a fast from wasted time, from lazy habits. Proclaim a fast from impatience, from gossip, from complaining, from it all. For these few short weeks of Lent, devote your time not to the latest news, not to the latest entertainment, but to simple prayer and meditation on the Word of God.

Rend your hearts, and return to the Lord, and flee from all that does not lead to him.

Surely if we fast from these things, the devil will soon find other ways to tempt us. He is master of a thousand arts. But why should we give in to him completely? Why should he have an easy way with us? Flee and resist him. For our God is the master of a hundred thousand arts, his Word is our strong fortress and refuge.

Flee to his word, to teaching and exhortation like James chapter 4, “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”

Let these words of wisdom be enough, to drive us back to God. To return in all humility and contrition. So that we cast ourselves on his abounding love and mercy.

O God, you know our wickedness, our bloodstained hands, you know our constant backsliding. Like sheep we always stray. We have turned, every one, to his own way. We defile your name, O God. You placed your name upon us in baptism, making us Christians, but we bring you dishonor. We are hypocrites. We join the passions and pleasures of the world. We chase whatever catches our eye. Our hearts ought to be cleansed and pure, but envy and greed remain. Our lives ought to be filled with love, but we do not love our neighbor as ourselves.

Have mercy, O Lord. Spare us. Hold back your hand, and do not strike us. Remember, O Lord, your children that you baptized and claimed for your own. Your name is on us, we are yours. “So why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’” O Lord, if you destroy us, even though we deserve it, then the unbelievers of the world will feel justified. They will be secure in their unbelief, they will mock you and say, “Where is their God?”

So be jealous for your holy name, O Lord, and for we who bear it. For your own name’s sake show us mercy. Relent from disaster. Do not make your church a byword among the nations.

As for those who mock the church, who call us hypocrites and hate your Son, have mercy on them as well. Forgive them, for they know not what they do. They did not know your Son when they put him to death, still they smear his holy blood in the dirt by their scornful words. But do not strike them. Soften their hearts. Join them with us in faith.

Have mercy, O God. Save us by your Son. For you laid the sins of the world on him. You poured out our cup, the cup of wrath we should have drunk, you poured it on your only begotten Son. Your wrath is spent, O God. How vast is your mercy, to give us a cup of blessing instead.

Yes Lord, we know we are dust, and to dust we shall return. But forgive us for his sake, and make us alive in him.

“Then the LORD became jealous for his land and had pity on his people. The LORD answered and said to his people, ‘Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations.’”

Thanks be to God, for his great pity. He has not remained silent, he has not cut us off forever. He has answered us, in these last days. He has spoken to us by his Son. For the sake of his holy name, he lifts up the church. He sends us grain and wine. He satisfies us with the bread of his own body, the wine of the cup of his saving blood. He washes our wounds, he anoints us with oil, and he clothes us in white garments of his righteousness. Then he makes us stand again, cleansed and pure. Thanks be to our God, forever. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.