

22 February 2023
Ash Wednesday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Repent. Receive. Rejoice!”

Text: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; Joel 2:12-19; 2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10

Yup. That sin that you confessed tonight, I took that sin, Jesus says. And that one . . . and that one . . . and that one, too. Yup, all of them. There is no sin you confessed tonight that I did not take and die for on the cross. There is no sin you confessed tonight that surprised me. There is no sin you confessed tonight that I did not already know. Because I know you. I know you better than you know yourself. I know your sin more than you do. Which is good. Because if you know that I know every sin, that there is no sin I do not know of, then you can be sure I died for every one. If there were sins I did not know about, did I die for them? But I know them all, and died for them all. For every sin of every person. For you and all your sins. That the cost be paid, the punishment be taken, and you be set free in forgiveness. That’s what I want you to know, Jesus says. Not just all your sins, but even more, all my forgiveness.

So Ash Wednesday. It’s about sin, it’s about confession, it’s about death, it’s about *dust you are and to dust you will return*. All of that. It’s because we have practiced our righteousness before men, because we love the admiration and praise of men. It’s because we have let our left hand know what our right hand is doing, and how often we want everyone else to know as well. It’s because we have been hypocrites, condemning others for the very sins we do. It’s because we want others to think we’re holy, or at least not so bad, while we look inside ourselves, in our hearts and minds, and know the reality of our sin is far worse than anyone knows. Evil and wicked thoughts and desires that even if they don’t make it out of us in our words and deeds nonetheless live in us. And maybe have deep roots in us. And it’s because we have laid up treasures for ourselves on earth. And because we have and continue to pursue what does not and will not last, and think these things more important than the things of God. And we know they’re not! But we act like that, live like that, anyway.

It’s ugly, isn’t it? What’s in us. Our sin. What it has made of us.

But it’s not just us. This is why the prophet Joel called the people of Israel to repentance. And not just *some* of them - *all* of them. The whole congregation, the elders, the children, even the nursing infants! The bridegroom and the bride, and all the priests and ministers. No one excluded. Everyone desperately sinful, like us. And Joel says to do this, repent, not just on the outside but on the inside. Not just rending, tearing, your garments, but your hearts. Not just weeping, but mourning. **Because** . . . because **the Lord, your God, is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love**. Because the

Lord your God doesn't want to condemn, but save. He doesn't want to accuse, but forgive. He wants to bless, you, with His mercy and love. But if we're too busy hanging onto our sins and living in our sins and pursuing the things of this world, we miss the gifts. Our hearts and minds captured by the things of this world and life until they are captured by satan at the end of our life. The end of our life that may be closer than we all think. None of us knows.

So **return**, Joel pleads. Now. We don't know if things will get better in this life, here and now. But we do know this, because we have the promise of God: that our sins will be forgiven, that our Father will not reject us, and that from Him we have the gift of eternal life. Because of Jesus. The Saviour the people of the Old Testament were waiting for in faith, and the Saviour that we, by faith, know has come. The Saviour who has taken upon Himself ALL our sins, from the least to the greatest, none too small, none too large, none done too often. All sins, on Him. All sins, atoned for by Him. All sins, buried with Him. To set you free.

Because for your sake, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, God the Father **made him**, His Son, Jesus, **to be sin** - He **who knew no sin!** - **so that in him**, in Jesus, **we might become the righteousness of God**. We be right with God again.

That means - Jesus being made sin for us - that means - *in a sense* - that Jesus was Adam and Eve, hanging on the cross with their sin. Jesus was Cain, hanging on the cross with his sin. Jesus was Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, hanging on the cross with their sin. Jesus was Saul, David, and Solomon, hanging on the cross with all their sin. Jesus was Peter, hanging on the cross with his sin. Jesus was YOU, hanging on the cross with your sin. Hanging there in your place, so that you wouldn't. So that you have His place, at the Father's side, in heaven. Is that not amazing?

So **from** depths of woe we cry to Him (LSB #607), and **to** depths of woe He comes to us. And yes, *as rebels, Lord, we foolishly have wandered* (LSB #612), but as we will sing in just a moment, *Jesus sinners doth receive* (LSB #609). And receiving us, He does not leave us in our sin or to our sin, but creates in us clean hearts, and renews a right spirit within us (Psalm 51). That we not be who we were, but live new lives, as new creations - as His children. We fix our eyes on Jesus (Gradual), because He has fixed His eyes on us. And we are raised to life again.

So in the Old Testament, just as the Mercy Seat sat atop of and covered the Law, the Ten Commandments, which were kept inside the Ark, so too tonight, the Body and Blood of our Lord sits atop the black paraments on our altar. And eating and drinking the Body and Blood of Jesus, all our breaking of the Law, all our sin and unrighteousness is covered. Forgiven. By His blood. And we come into the presence of our Lord, and He welcomes us. He is delighted that you are here. Because He is here, **for you**.

So what have you done? How have you lived? How awful your sins? How perverse your ways? How wrong your thinking? How selfish your life? How unloving your words? How twisted your desires? How unworthy are you of Him?

Yup, Jesus says. You are unworthy. This is true. But I knew all that, all your sin and unworthiness, before I came. That's *why* I came. And that's why this is all gift. From me, to you.

Behold, now is the favorable time. So repent of your sins.

Behold, now is the day of salvation. So receive His forgiveness.

And rejoice and be glad! For as Jesus said, ***where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*** Well you are His treasure, so His heart, His love, His forgiveness, is here, **for you.**

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.