

14 February 2024
Ash Wednesday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Dying Christians or Dying Christians?”

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

This is who you are (*pointing to ash cross on my forehead*).

You are a Christian, marked with the sign of the cross in your baptism.

But you are a *dying* Christian, a dust and ashes Christian, because you are a sinner. And you are not because you happen to do things called sins, though you do. You are because you were born that way. You inherited this sinful condition from your parents. And the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). So unless Jesus returns first, you are going to die.

People usually don't want to talk about that. It's not very cheery. And it's scary. We don't want to die, because we were not created to die. Death is an intrusion into the life that God created us to have. And an ending of that life. So we put it out of our minds. Think about other things. Be too busy with life to think about death. But is that good? Or does that simply make us unprepared to die? Would it not be better to be ready when that time comes for each of us? Ready to die a blessed death?

Because try as we might to put it out of mind, death is not so easily shoved aside or locked in the closet of our minds. It keeps coming back to haunt us. Death in the news. The death of a loved one. A terminal disease. The epidemic of fentanyl poisoning. *And Ash Wednesday*. Every year, Ash Wednesday with its black paraments and ash crosses. Forcing us to face facts, to face reality, to face death. This is who we are: *dying Christians*.

But, you see, that's the *good* news! We're dying Christians. And as Christians, we can face death with confidence. The confidence of the empty tomb. That at the end of this season of Lent is not death but life. And not just life, but *eternal* life. Life that death cannot end. Life that has overcome death. *Jesus' life*. Because, as we heard St. Paul preach tonight: ***For our sake*** - for the sake of all of us who are dying - ***he*** - God the Father - ***made him*** - His Son, Jesus - ***to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him*** - in Jesus - ***we might become the righteousness of God***. And you know what the righteous do? The righteous rise. They rise from death to life. To new life.

So if you want life, repent. Repent of yourself, who you are and what you do, and receive the righteousness of God. That's what the prophet Joel calls to us tonight. ***Return to the Lord your God***, he says, ***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; and he relents over disaster***. The disaster that has afflicted the world as

the wages of sin - death. He relents because He came to do something about it. Or to paraphrase what Paul said before: *For your sake God made Jesus to be **you**, the sinner, the condemned one, the crucified one, the dying one; so that you can be **Him**, the righteous one, the living one.* To repent, then, is not just to be sorry for your sin, but to say: *I want to be **Him**, not me. I want, I need, His life.* And when you hear those words, *I forgive you all your sins*, that is God saying: yes! Here is His life. A new life for you.

And you know what people who have received that new life do? They pray, fast, and give alms. Lots of other things, too. Good things. But also these things. That's what Jesus said. For in His words that we heard today, He didn't say, *if* you pray, or *if* you give to the needy, or *if* you fast; but *when* you pray, *when* you give to the needy, *when* you fast. These are not new or special commandments; Jesus is describing you and what you do. **Because they are what Jesus did.** He fasted during those forty days in the wilderness. He prayed constantly. And He gave to those in need. He showed us these are all good and helpful things. And with His life, a new life, given to you, it is what you do as well.

Though we mess it up. We're good at that, aren't we? Messing things up! We are tempted to not pray, give, and fast, but instead set our minds on and treasure and cling to the things that **moths** feast on, that age and **rust destroy**, and the **thieves** covet and steal. Or we do those things, but not because of who we are, but to be *who we want to be* in the eyes of others. Perhaps to be considered holy, or sincere, or to be admired, or to make me think I'm better than those who don't. Both of those ways - not doing, or doing for the wrong reasons - is the be the hypocrite Jesus talked about. Something else to repent of.

But if we just be who we are in Jesus, live as the baptized, rejoice in His Absolution, be shaped by His mercy, and feed on His Body and Blood, or in other words, set our minds on and treasure those things that are *eternal* - then though we die, yet shall we live. Then though you may suffer as Paul and his fellow workers did, **afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger**, none of these things can take your life. For you have already been given the unlimited, unmeasured, unbounded life of Christ. The treasure above all others. The treasure Jesus came to give to you, and the treasure He is *still* coming to give *to all*.

Every once in a while, Ash Wednesday falls on Valentines Day. For some, that is an odd combination of days. But not for us. For us, it is perfect. For as we enter the season of Lent, it is to see once again **the love of God for us** in the crucifixion of His Son. That *God so loved the world* (John 3:16). That *greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends* (John 15:13) - except when He lays it down for His enemies! For *while we were still sinners, Christ died for us* (Romans 5:8). Died, that we be forgiven. Died, that we might live. Died, that His love raise us to new life. For love is always about the other, not me. Love gives. And Jesus gives Himself for you on the cross, that He give Himself to you here in His Word and Sacraments. That the treasures of heaven you have already now.

So this is who we are (*pointing to ash cross on my forehead*).

Dying because of my sin. *Christian* because of Jesus' love. His love unknown (LSB #430), unlike any other love in this world. His love that means that though this is who I am, this is not who I will be. This is my present, not my future. My future is life. My future is glory. Yours, too.

So today we repent to let go of the present and cling to the future. A future that may come sooner than you think! But *whenever* it does, *however* it does, matters not. For we are looking forward to Easter. Yes, the one that will come 46 days from now when we rejoice in the resurrection of Jesus. But even more, to the *great* Easter when all will rise from death when Jesus comes again. When no more feasting moths, no more destroying age or rust, no more thieves, only life. Only joy. Only Jesus.

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