



St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church
Wilton, WI
Ash Wednesday
February 17, 2021
**Inviting People to
Journey with Christ's Family
in Spreading God's Love and Mercy**

On Ash Wednesday we begin our forty-day journey toward Easter with a day of fasting and repentance. Marking our foreheads with dust, we acknowledge that we die and return to the earth. At the same time, the dust traces the life-giving cross indelibly marked on our foreheads at baptism. While we journey through Lent to return to God, we have already been reconciled to God through Christ. We humbly pray for God to make our hearts clean while we rejoice that "now is the day of salvation." Returning to our baptismal call, we more intentionally bear the fruits of mercy and justice in the world.

Be Thou My Vision



1 Be thou my vi - sion, O Lord of my heart;
2 Be thou my wis - dom, and thou my true word;
3 Rich - es I heed not, nor vain, emp - ty praise,
4 Light of my soul, af - ter vic - to - ry won,



naught be all else to me, save that thou art:
I ev - er with thee and thou with me, Lord.
thou mine in - her - i - tance, now and al - ways:
may I reach heav - en's joys, O heav - en's Sun!



thou my best thought both by day and by night,
Thou my soul's shel - ter, and thou my high tow'r,
thou and thou on - ly, the first in my heart,
Heart of my own heart, what - ev - er be - fall,



wak - ing or sleep - ing, thy pres - ence my light.
raise thou me heav'n - ward, O Pow'r of my pow'r.
great God of heav - en, my trea - sure thou art.
still be my vi - sion, O Rul - er of all.

Text: Irish, 8th cent.; vers. Eleanor H. Hull, 1860–1935, alt.; tr. Mary E. Byrne, 1880–1931
Music: SLANE, Irish traditional

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Almighty and ever-living God, you hate nothing you have made, and you forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and honest hearts, so that, truly repenting of our sins, we may receive from you, the God of all mercy, full pardon and forgiveness through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen.

WORD

FIRST READING

Because of the coming day of the LORD, the prophet Joel calls the people to a community lament. The repentant community declares that God is gracious and asks God to spare the people lest the nations doubt God's power to save.

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

- ¹ 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—
² 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.
- ¹² Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
- ¹³ 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.
- ¹⁴ 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?
- ¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
- ¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷Between 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?'"

Psalm 51:1-17

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.
²Wash me through and through from my wickedness,
and cleanse me from my sin.
³For I know my offenses,
and my sin is ever before me.
⁴Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are justified when you speak and right in your judgment.
⁵Indeed, I was born steeped in wickedness,
a sinner from my mother's womb.
⁶Indeed, you delight in truth deep within me,
and would have me know wisdom deep within.
⁷Remove my sins with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be purer than snow.
⁸Let me hear joy and gladness;
that the body you have broken may rejoice.
⁹Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my wickedness.
¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
¹¹Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.
¹³Let me teach your ways to offenders,
and sinners shall be restored to you.
¹⁴Rescue me from bloodshed, O God of my salvation,
and my tongue shall sing of your righteousness.
¹⁵O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.
¹⁶For you take no delight in sacrifice, or I would give it.
You are not pleased with burnt offering.
¹⁷The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit;
a troubled and broken heart, O God, you will not despise.

SECOND READING

The ministry of the gospel endures many challenges and hardships. Through this ministry, God's reconciling activity in the death of Christ reaches into the depths of our lives to bring us into a right relationship with God. In this way, God accepts us into the reality of divine salvation.

2 Corinthians 5:20b---6:10

^{20b}We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

^{6:1}As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.

²For 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!

³We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

HOLY GOSPEL

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commends almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, but emphasizes that spiritual devotion must not be done for show.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹“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.

²“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. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵“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. ⁶But 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.

¹⁶“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. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so 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.

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

SERMON

(By Interim Bishop Chris Boerger of the La Crosse Area Synod. Transcribed by Pr. Cathy from the YouTube closed captions.)

God's beloved people,

Grace, mercy and peace to you, from God our Creator and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'm Chris Boerger, Interim Bishop of the La Crosse Area Synod, and I greet you on this Ash Wednesday as we begin the walk to the cross, and from the cross to the empty tomb.

This is an important time in the life of the church, a time when we must face reality. Now, I'm a member of

Saint Mark's Lutheran Church in Tacoma, Washington. And, all of us were given little packets of ashes; ashes to on this day take out and mark ourselves with the cross of Christ, remembering we are dust and to dust we shall return. Not terribly friendly words, but very real words.

In this time of COVID, we're seeing more how dusty we can be as our relationships are separated by to now being just by ZOOM and phone, as our work is separated from the ability to work with people in the ways we would like too, as we think about the many things we would like to do, but we're not able to do. But, the reality, and all of that is, Christ comes among us. Christ comes among us and says--remember, do not be like the hypocrites. Don't base your faith only on your ability to do things, but do it in secret. Be the church. Be who you are, God's beloved people. Not because you can't always do the things that are informed in front of you, but sometimes you have to do them in secret You have to go into your room, you have to be isolated, you have to be quarantined, you have to be a part that doesn't change the reality of what's going on around you. It just means you're going to behave differently.

I've always seen the Season of Lent as a season of brutal honesty; a time for us to look at ourselves and see just who we are, whose we are, and what help we need. [Mostly it] is a time of honest, honesty for the church. What have we made so important that during this time of COVID we questioned our ability to be the church, rather than recognizing that the church is called together by God's Holy Spirit, empowered by that Spirit to gather, whether physically or remotely. Still the church called to be the people of God: Gods beloved people.

That's who we are, and we enter this time of Lent preparing. Preparing ourselves to look at ourselves and also to see what it is around us that needs to change. That's never easy. Change requires a commitment on our part to look at things differently. To see the world as God sees it rather than the way I would like to see it. If I [wouldn't know] that would not be good for me to be in charge and you would soon understand that, nor would [it be] good for you to be in charge. God is the one who has called us into this church and called us to this night to hear the words again--remember, you are dust and to dust you shall return. But you do it with the cross being made on your forehead. The first time that happened was in the waters of Baptism. So, in the midst of that threat there is the promise of hope.

I've often said that my funeral took place on July 2, 1949, at Trinity Lutheran Church in Marysville, Ohio, where I was buried through the waters of baptism into Christ. And Christ arose with me, so it is no longer I who live, but Christ in me. That's the challenge for the church, today. To see that we are about Jesus, about being the people who say--even death is no longer the ultimate threat, because in Christ we have been made alive, and in Christ, we have been given hope.

Lent is a time for us to think about changing our habits. In the old days, the thought was--what are you going to give up for Lent, and which [we] usually chose some bad habit that we had, that we'd like to set aside for these 40-days. (Probably, to pick them up come Easter Sunday, as part of our celebration.)

A number of years ago, I said it's time for us to stop giving things up for Lent, and time for us to add something for Lent. What new discipline of the Spirit shall we take on? Shall we look seriously at how we will support those who [are] around us who are the widow, the orphan, and the stranger; the people who God has a preference for, but for whom we in society have thrown/cast them off. Shall we look at this time of Lent to say--How will I add something, so that my physical well-being will be better? How will I add something so that my spiritual practices will be increased? How will I add something, so that my love of neighbor will be seen in ways never seen before?

Lent is that time to honestly look at ourselves and say--What could I be doing to show that I am a disciple of Christ? Not like the hypocrites in the gospel text, not doing it so that people will say--Oh, look, there they are! But rather, so that our God who sees us will know that we are responding [with] the love of Christ, richly poured out to us in Christ on the cross.

We are about a people of the cross, knowing that God enters into our daily lives in all aspects of our lives, not just the good ones. That God is present in the midst of the hurting, the crying, the undecided, the terrified, and even us. That God is there for us, with us, calling us, challenging us, encouraging us, forgiving us, giving us hope. Hope that does not disappoint, but hope that says we can face the world as it really is.

I'm just learning about the La Crosse Area Synod, and I am very impressed with what I have seen so far. The love for one another and the care for one another, is outstanding. Oh, it always could be better, but it's there. How do we now build that gift to move outside our church walls into the community into the people around us? Not so that they would see us as people out to get something for ourselves, but that we are people out there for them. For them, because God is for us, and also for them! That's the challenge.

The challenge is to not see our rewards. Oh, we'd like them. We'd like people to talk nicely about us. We like to hear good things about us. But, that's why Jesus said--maybe you'll do these things in secret, so that nobody knows. So nobody will come up to you and say--good job, well done. No, your God in heaven knows these things and sees them, and you will receive your reward. Your reward promised you in baptism is yours and will continue to be yours.

But, in the meantime, now we can take some risks. I don't worry about whether God likes me or not, I already know that God loves me. Knowing that, how do I now act that way to the people around me; the people around me also loved by God? How do I move up outside the church doors into the world to see my neighbors and my friends and even the total stranger, to be people whom God loves. That's our challenge.

We Lutherans have got the right theology, we just have trouble sometimes putting that theology into practice. We really would like someone to give us some credit. We've already got all we need. We already have the credit we are going to need in secret laid up for us in heaven. And in the meantime, we can take some risks. We can be the people God calls us to be, not because we're going to get a reward. We've already got that. But, because we have received that, we now know and go into the world to say--we're here, we're here for you, we're here with you.

As I was in La Crosse a few weeks ago, I discovered there are homeless in La Crosse. How do we reach out to them? How do we, rather than just shaking our heads as we walk by, actually say--what can we do to care for the homeless? What can we do to help them as God has helped us?

As I was in La Crosse, I saw that the community has many strong things, and many things that it would like to hide. Lent is about not hiding. Oh, go into your rooms in secret, give in secret, pray in secret, but also be in the world. Be in the world, as God has placed you there. [As] a seminary professor who once said--we can only know how bad it is, when we know how good it is. We can only know the reality of our world around us fully, when we recognize the death and resurrection of Jesus for us. That's what Lent is all about: Christ is for us. Christ is for the world.

Now, how do we take that into the world in a way that says to people-- it's not about us, it's not about you, it's about Jesus. It's about our God who comes amongst us, who lives amongst us, who sends us out with the audacious audacity to say--we are the people of God, we are! Oh, we are dust and [to] the dust we shall return.

And, it's no longer we who live, but Christ in us.

That's where we go this Lent. Into the real parts of our life that need to hear that message. Into our families, often broken by pain of illness or division. Into a country divided politically, economically, ethnically, in so many ways. We are called to go into that world. Honestly, this is not what God intended. But, to get there, God didn't give us a new set of orders. God gave us a Son; a Son who goes to the cross, who then calls us to Godself and says--you are here, you are dust, but you will receive your reward which will be beyond your wildest dreams. Now go, live that way. Add something this Lent. Be about praying secretly, giving secretly, serving secretly, and just watch the power of God grow in you, and in the people around you.

Tonight, we start toward the cross. Tonight, we begin the walk, knowing where we'll end up. We'll be standing there watching our Lord die for us and then hearing that he is risen! But, let's not jump to the end of the story, until we've dealt with our world today. Deal with the world as God has created it, and as we have messed it up. Remember, you are dust and to dust you shall return. For as many have been put on Christ have died in Christ. That's the promise, and we live by that promise this Lent. Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Relying on the promises of God, we pray boldly for the church, the world, and all in need.

O God, you call your church to be ministers of reconciliation throughout the world. Inspire your church in its proclamation of the gospel and guide its ministries to build up the body of Christ. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

O God, you created the earth and all its inhabitants and you declared that it is good. Protect mountains and valleys, animals and plants, and direct us to be good stewards of all you have made. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

O God, you desire peace. Direct governments and leaders to work for the well-being of all people and raise up advocates to speak and serve on behalf of the downtrodden. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

O God, you are our hope in the midst of despair, our help in the midst of sorrow, and our consolation in the midst of affliction. Grant comfort to all who suffer in body, mind, or spirit especially Katie, Judy, Darlene, Paul, Pam, Alrita, Frank, Jeff, Tessa, Lisa, Bud, Gary, Jim, Harvey, and those we name aloud and in our hearts, and support caregivers who attend to all in need. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

O God, you are love, and you call us to love one another. Accompany with your grace those journeying toward baptism and call us all to repentance as we prepare to celebrate Christ's death and resurrection. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

O God, you are our life and our salvation. We give you thanks for the righteous who have died in faith. Inspire us by their example to proclaim your steadfast love. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We entrust ourselves and all our prayers to you, O faithful God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Time of Reflection and Silent Prayer

Imposition of Ashes

Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth. May these ashes be a sign of our mortality and penitence, reminding us that only by the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ are we given eternal life, through the same Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen

Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service



1 Lord, whose love in hum-ble ser-vice bore the weight of hu-man need,
2 Still your chil-dren wan-der home-less; still the hun-gry cry for bread;
3 As we wor-ship, grant us vi-sion, till your love's re-veal-ing light
4 Called by wor-ship to your ser-vice, forth in your dear name we go,



who up-on the cross, for-sak-en, worked your mer-cy's per-fect deed:
still the cap-tives long for free-dom; still in grief we mourn our dead.
in its height and depth and great-ness dawns up-on our quick-ened sight,
to the child, the youth, the a-ged, love in liv-ing deeds to show;



we, your ser-vants, bring the wor-ship not of voice a-lone, but heart;
As you, Lord, in deep com-pas-sion healed the sick and freed the soul,
mak-ing known the needs and bur-dens your com-pas-sion bids us bear,
hope and health, good-will and com-fort, coun-sel, aid, and peace we give,



con-se-crat-ing to your pur-pose ev-'ry gift which you im-part.
by your Spir-it send your pow-er to our world to make it whole.
stir-ring us to ar-dent ser-vice, your a-bun-dant life to share.
that your ser-vants, Lord, in free-dom may your mer-cy know and live.