

*In nomine Jesu*

## FOLLOWING JESUS TO JERUSALEM

**Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**

Our sermon for this Ash Wednesday is taken from our inspired readings, with our thoughts informed by the following translated verse:

*But when all of you may continue to fast, not must you all become as the hypocrites – gloomy ones – for they are continually rendering unrecognizable their faces so that they might appear to men to be fasting; truly, I say to you all, they continue to have their reward.<sup>1</sup>*

Today, those words follow on this this past Sunday's call of Jesus to the Twelve,

*Behold, we continue to go up into Jerusalem, and it will be completed, all the things having been written through the prophets for the Son of Man.<sup>2</sup>*

Today, as our Lenten journey begins, you, like the Twelve, are being called to follow Jesus. Over the next few weeks, the Word of God will lead you to follow Jesus. It will culminate in Holy Saturday's, *Resurrection Vigil: Service of Lights and Readings*. We recognize that the 40 days of Lent are given to us as a special time of remembrance. They are Jesus' gift to us through His Church. This helps us to remember our Savior and our sins.

This year, starting next week, you will be introduced to, or re-introduced to, Jesus' Way of Suffering through a biblically-based following of the Word along nine Stations of the Cross. (Over the centuries, there have been as few as four, and as many as 20 stations). Such personal

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<sup>1</sup> *Matthew 6:17.*

<sup>2</sup> *Luke 18:31b.*

devotional practice, dating back in time to the 12th and 13th centuries AD (and much earlier than that in less structured manners) will then be available for personal reflection, as the stations on CLC's walls will remain throughout the coming years. Through such helps, including the Lenten Reflections which Jean sent out yesterday, you are being asked to continue to individually follow Jesus as part of the body of pilgrims to whom He has joined you with in this place.

So today you have begun another season of following Him into His Passion and death in and for your sins. All of that began today, after a pastoral address, with the Litany. That prayer form, consisting of bids with congregational Trinitarian responses – pleas for mercy – dates back in corporate worship to at least the 4th century AD. The Litany was such an appreciated part of the Lord's public services that no less a reformer than Dr. Martin Luther once reported, (after AD 1529), "We sing the Litany in church in Latin and in the vernacular." (Of course he had removed for us invocations of the saints, intercession for the pope, and for the deceased).<sup>3</sup>

From that ancient order of prayer, our following Jesus moved on to receiving ashes upon our bodies. They were imposed upon our bodies with the stating of the facts of human life, death, and resurrection. Then, with the marks of repentance upon ourselves for all to see, we followed the Word into confession. We did so that we each would hear Jesus say, "I forgive you all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

So we, with you as part of we, have begun following Jesus on the

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<sup>3</sup> *Luther's Works, "Liturgy and Hymns,"* V. 53, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965, p. 154.

road to Jerusalem another year as the days lengthen. We reflect upon our sins, our sinfulness and our Savior who takes them, and their guilt, from us. From the time of the Reformation, Lutherans have also added to the reception of ashes, the practice of fasting. They were careful to ensure, in their Church orders, from which today's has been derived, that people's consciences were not bound by suggested days and distinctions of foods.

Their basis for this can be found in Jesus' words for God's calling us to follow Him in His annual Ash Wednesday services to us. Hear Jesus again speak of His thoughts on repentance and the actions of the faithful:

*But when all of you may continue to fast, not must you all become as the hypocrites – gloomy ones – for they are continually rendering unrecognizable their faces, so that they might appear to men to be fasting; truly, I say to you all, they continue to have their reward.<sup>4</sup>*

Jesus assumes His disciples would fast, His words indicate that. They were following ancient practices that dated to about 1,000 years before Christ came into His creation. They fasted at times in sackcloth and ashes. This practice was common in the Israelite community, and among those who were not born Jews. They participated in personal fasts, by abstaining from various foods and lawful pleasurable pursuits, to help themselves and to show that they were, indeed, repentant of their sins.

Fasting in sackcloth and ashes was a practice that was continued on a regular basis for 1,000 years after Jesus died to bring covering for sins. Then, among the Christian community, fasting and ashes were used as public signs of repentance for gross public sins such as murder, sexual

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 6:17.

infidelity (fornication and adultery), and armed robbery.

Those are good, correct and salutary ways to fast and wear ashes. Yet, there are ways in which they are not beneficial. To fast and wear ashes as signs of how good, or pious or devout one is, is misusing the intent of the Word of Jesus. Even this day, churches in our community are enabling people to show to God, and others, in their ashes, the self-serving image of: “look at me!”

That is one reason why we have made efforts to be found faithful by immediately following the imposition of ashes with public confession and individual absolution. Ash Wednesday rites have been received again among us. Along with them we hear and believe Jesus’ words concerning our sinfulness and His forgiveness. From His Word, God reveals the results He desires to come out of any ashes and fasting:

- remembering that God has loosed the bonds of wickedness;
- undoing burdens of conscience that God’s people have placed upon others (the improper application of the Law);
  
- letting oppressed peoples go free;
- breaking every yoke of slavery:
  - sharing food with the hungry;
  - housing those who have been cast out from their homes;
  - clothing the naked...<sup>5</sup>

The Lord’s given intents of the heart just listed are for those who would rightly fast in the practice of true religion. For such as those, for you,

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<sup>5</sup> Paraphrase from *Isaiah* 58:6-7.

this is a special time of reflection and fasting. The ashes you wear are given to help you to remember that you have been given forgiveness of your sins in Jesus. That means that you are free to forgive and care for others as He continues to call to you to follow Him with these words:

*But you, when you continue to fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to the men to be fasting, but to your Father, the one in the hidden; and your Father, the One seeing in the hidden, He will give to you.”<sup>6</sup>*

In doing so you will remember that the Christian life is found in confessing one’s sins and receiving Christ’s forgiveness. You will not look to the ashes upon you as anything other than a simple outward sign of inward repentance, that which a forgiven sinner is empowered to do. So, again this Ash Wednesday, as it has been for some of you for more than 90 Ash Wednesdays, you begin the fast of 40 days, through the Word, following Jesus to Jerusalem where He earns forgiveness, life and salvation for you.

**The peace which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**

Ash Wednesday (LSB One-year series)  
Joel 2:12-19; II Peter 1:2-11; Matthew 6:16-21  
February 18, 2015  
*Pastor Michael A. Merchause*

*Soli deo gloria*

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 6: 17-18.