

GOD IS MERCIFUL AND READY TO FORGIVE HIS REPENTANT PEOPLE

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 guided by the following translated verse:

Then YHWH became jealous for His land and He had pity upon His people.¹

This Lententide will offer us opportunities to gather on Wednesdays in order to hear the Word of God as it has been explained for centuries through the *Small Catechism's*, "Table of Duties." They are those which declare, in part, the third use of the Law, yet they will still depend, that is, "hang upon," God's Gospel promises. In our day, as many people in the Church, following this past year's continuing events, even more anxiously await the coming Great and Terrible Day of the Lord, we have been given to hear from an Old Covenant text that proclaimed judgment, called for repentance, and declared God's mercy long ago for those who turned from their sins. The Word that called God's people to repentance went forth as they reeled from the devastation that came upon them from multiple plagues – in that time, of locusts. Through that Word, even as it promised God's continued discipline that would come upon His people as they remained in their sins, we can also hear in it today that, with the faithful long ago, the declaration that God is merciful and ready to forgive His repentant people.

Today, we have been led to understand that last point through the words and actions that God has caused to be declared and enacted among us in this place. In a genuine way, Ash Wednesday's Festival Service, especially through its "Service of Preparation," follows the pattern of the Litany given by God, through Joel, long ago. Hear again how the service, which some have called the, "Litany of Priests," was laid out in the ninth century B.C.:

"Blow (a) trumpet in Zion, all of you sanctify (a) fast, all of you call (an)

¹ Joel 2:18.

assembly.”²

Ok, so we did not blow a trumpet to call you here, nor did we even Tweet you here... but, we have publicly announced this solemn assembly for some time! Today, we have sanctified a fast. That is, we have set aside, at a minimum, the Glorias as we prepare to consecrate the fast of the forty days of Lent as a special time to remember God’s grace for us who will to turn from our sins and walk in newness of life. We have called an assembly, one in which we are present now. Our call to this service has gathered you, God’s people, that you might be sanctified, that is, declared holy by God’s Word. That “holification” is being lived out in you today even as you have confessed your sins and received God’s blood-bought forgiveness. We pray that you behold in this assembly a reflection of that which was called for long ago with words like these:

“All of you gather (the) people, all of you sanctify (the) congregation, all of you assemble (the) elders, gather (the) male children, and nursing infants, let the bridegroom leave his room and bride her chamber.”³

The invitation to this feast has gone out to all in our congregation, no one was purposefully excluded. You have responded. None of you has excluded yourself due to age or humanly understandable worldly circumstances. Part of that is likely due to the reality that, in our New Testament era, there are essentially no biblically prescribed and directed reasons for the faithful to be apart from the Lord’s solemn assemblies. Part of that surely has to do with your being held fast to the truth that you have no other gods... worldly or otherworldly. Think about that which you have done already as a response to the prophet’s ancient call:

“Between the vestibule and the altar all of you let the priests, those ministering to YHWH, weep and say, ‘Spare, O YHWH, all Your people. And give not Your heritage for (a) reproach, for (a) proverb among (the) Gentiles.’”⁴

² Joel 2:15.

³ Joel 2:16.

⁴ Joel 2: 17 a,b.

You came here today, having set aside the things that tempt others to be apart from God's services. You did so as you responded to God's invitation to enter into this full service of repentance and renewal. In doing this, you began your response to God's call by following the Litany of the Priests that was called for in Israel's time of plagues.

Think about what has happened here, around this font. God's priests, those whom He has washed with the waters of repentance and life, stood before the entrance, the vestibule if you will, of the Lord's Altar Table. Here, we cried for God's mercy, that He would spare us, and that He would help us. We implored Him to hear our prayers. Following our petition for His peace, we again begged Him for mercy.

Following that, we participated in an age's old ritual. We received the ashes of mourning upon our persons. We then rightly confessed our sins, our sinfulness, and our dependance upon God's mercy to remove them, and the punishments we deserve on account of them, from us.

Did you think as all of that was being done, that we were being reminded that there is still time, even in our age of the culture of death, that there is time to avert the completion of God's judgment on us through our sincere repentance and mourning on account of our sins? Did you reflect that all that has gone on so far in this Festival Service has been given to us to remind us that God is merciful and ready to forgive the sins of those who repent?

Those among us who have publicly confessed to *continue steadfast in this confession and Church, and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it...* a promise that anyone can make at any age, for it counts on God — *by the grace of God* — have again learned the emphasis of today's solemn fast. Whenever you recited the teaching that confession consists of two parts, you were being prepared for this day. You were

learning to trust in God's grace. You should recall that holding onto His grace moves our, your, confession of sins to be made on account of the absolution – forgiveness – that God wills to continue to have proclaimed to you, to us.

As repentant and forgiven sinners, God's Word today moved us as He did the faithful long ago to cry out on behalf of the world. This day, as the Word following God's Word of forgiveness was proclaimed, we all were reminded of our continuing right, as God's chosen people of His New Covenant, to repeatedly cry out to Him for His mercy... and that, in it, we have refuge for our souls.

In that divine sanctuary of forgiveness, we were then freed to cry out to God Father, Son and Spirit, to have mercy on all those in this sinful world who cannot pray to him. In following the ancient "Litany of the Priests" this day, you have continued to exercise your duties as New Covenant priests. You have interceded for those who do not yet know and believe in the One True God. You have petitioned God on behalf of those who are not able to lift up their own voices – be they infants in the womb, or the elderly whose minds are no longer clear.

How much power has God given you, in His Word, from His Word, through His Word! And, you are here today to receive it, and to respond with it, thanks be to God! After all, you know, confess, believe, and act on the reality that God is merciful and ready to forgive His repentant people.

Our text reveals that with words like these, given as the prophet's response to the Divine Call to repentance he proclaimed: "*Why,*" [should] they say among [the] peoples, "*Where is their God?*"⁵ His question presents a very logical conclusion. In essence, he reminds the people, by throwing God's promise to forgive back to Him, that He will not let His people forever suffer under His rebuke that the unbelieving multitudes will be given no reason to taunt God for unfaithfulness. How did God

⁵ Joel 2:17.

respond to His faithful few then? The same way He continues to respond to those whom He moves to sorrow over their sins and to walk in new life now:

*Then YHWH became jealous for His land and He had pity upon His people.*⁶

The Word of the Lord promises that the Great I Am wills to show compassion for His people, even when they are suffering under the natural consequences of their sins. Even though, for our times of lack of trust in God above all things, we deserve any Divine chastisement that we continue to receive, God will not forever let unbelievers ridicule us, and therefore Him, for our faith in times of trial.

Today, again, we have been given the biblical record to sustain us in these trying times. Some 2,860 years ago, the prophet Joel cried out God's Word. It promised destruction to a people who had, in thought, word and deed, wandered far from the Lord. They were without excuse. They knew the truth about God. It has been revealed in the confession that *"God threatens to punish all who transgress these commandments. We should therefore fear his wrath and not disobey these commandments."*⁷

Long ago, God's people had ritualized the Lord's sacrifices. They went through the motions of performing them without faith in the Sacrifice they were given to foreshadow. They deserved the Law's judgments, for they had sinned greatly against God and His messengers.

Yet, even then, God did not leave His hearers hanging under the just condemnations that come to those who continue to unrepentantly break His Law. They were to know that which many of you have learned to confess, *"[God] promises grace and every blessing to all who keep [His commandments]."*⁸ Hear again how God led, even as He today leads, His people to repentance, and forgiveness, and life:

"Yet even now," says YHWH, "All of you return to Me with all your

⁶ Joel 2:18.

⁷Tappert, T. G. 2000, c1959. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia

⁸Tappert, T. G. 2000, c1959. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia

hearts, and in fasting, and in weeping, and in mourning.”⁹

With words like those, God gives His people His call to turn from their sins and live in His promises. So that they may “therefore love him, trust in him, and cheerfully do what he has commanded,” God gives His means to turn from sin and conduct their lives in newness, under His forgiveness. God grants the declaration of the Good News that He is gracious and merciful.¹⁰ God, through the prophet says,

“And all of you rend your hearts and your garments tear not to YHWH your God. For gracious and merciful is He, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and He relents of evil.”¹¹

You, the faithful of the Lord hear in that that you have God’s Word that moves you to confess your sins, to have true contrition, and to believe that you receive absolution – the sure knowledge, trust, and certain hope that your sins are forgiven by God in heaven. That is the Gospel faith. It is affected by God the Holy Spirit. He has been promised to work through God’s proclaimed Word in hearts, minds and souls. The Spirit through the Word moves people to drown their Old Natures, all the sins and evil desires we have as part of our fallen human nature. The Word and Spirit moves the faithful to allow their New Natures to arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.¹² That continues to happen, in every generation of the faithful, because we continue to learn that God is merciful and ever ready to forgive His repentant people.

God’s grace-work abounds. He, through his chosen means, has worked through penitential words spoken by you, the faithful. He continues to grant you forgiveness and the ability to do true good in these times of tribulation. It is God’s pleasure to enable you to rightly respond to His grace and mercy.

⁹ Joel 2:12.

¹⁰Tappert, T. G. 2000, c1959. *The book of Concord: The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia

¹¹ Joel 2:13.

¹² Cf. Tappert, T. G. 2000, c1959. *The book of Concord: The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia

God's mercies are yours because, on the Great and Terrible Day of the Lord, God poured out His wrath upon Jesus. He allowed His only begotten Son to bear the full brunt of punishment His people, you, on account of your sins, deserved. He looked away from the sin that covered the Son. God allowed Him to hang accursed upon the tree. In His sacrifice you are given the answer to this question first asked long, long, ago:

"Who knows? He might repent and relent, and cause to leave behind Him blessing, cereal offering and drink offering to YHWH your God."¹³

Such expectations of the faithful for God to be merciful have come to completion in Jesus the Christ. Here before you, you have genuine blessings prepared. Today, we have the fulfillment of that day long ago, that day of weeping, confessing, ashes, bread and wine. Here for you, soon, under the offerings of bread and wine the Lord will give you the blessing of His touch, His forgiveness. Here you have a present reminder that God is merciful and ready to forgive His repentant people.

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

Ash Wednesday (LSB One-year series)

Introit Psalm 57:1a, Antiphon Ps. 57:2, 1b; Joel 2:12-19; II Peter 1:2-11; Matthew 6:16-21

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Soli Deo Gloria

¹³ Joel 2:14.

Translation, second draft:

“And even now,” says YHWH, “All of you repent to Me in all your hearts, and in fasting, and in weeping, and in mourning.”¹⁴

“And all of you rend your hearts and not your garments tear to YHWH your God. For gracious and merciful is He, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and He relents of evil.”¹⁵

“Who knows, He might repent and relent, and cause to leave behind Him blessing, cereal offering and drink offering to YHWH your God.”¹⁶

“Blow trumpet in Zion, all of you sanctify (a) fast, all of you call (an) assembly.”¹⁷

“All of you gather (the) people, all of you sanctify (the) congregation, all of you assemble elders, gather male children, and nursing infants, let leave the bridegroom his room and bride her chamber.”¹⁸

“Between the vestibule and the altar all of you let the priests weep, the ones ministering to YHWH, and say, ‘Spare, O YHWH, all Your people. And give not Your heritage for reproach, for byword among (the) Gentiles.’”

“Why?” they say among peoples, “Where is their God?”¹⁹

Then became jealous, YHWH, for His land and He had pity upon His people.²⁰

And YHWH answered and said to His people, “Behold, I send to all of you the grain, and the wine, and the oil. And you all will be satisfied, and I will not make for you more reproach among (the) Gentiles.”²¹

¹⁴ Joel 2:12.

¹⁵ Joel 2:13.

¹⁶ Joel 2:14.

¹⁷ Joel 2:15.

¹⁸ Joel 2:16.

¹⁹ Joel 2:17.

²⁰ Joel 2:18.

²¹ Joel 2:19.