

IN NOMINE JESU

REPENT: FOR GOD IS GRACIOUS AND MERCIFUL

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

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

“And all of you rend your hearts and tear not your garments to YHWH your God. For gracious and merciful is He, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and He relents of evil.”¹

This Lententide will find us gathered on Wednesdays to hear the Word of God as it is explained in the Chief Parts of the Small Catechism. Today finds us discovering from this day’s readings, a foreshadowing of the Six Chief Parts. As we look forward to remembering the Great and Terrible Day of the Lord in which God poured out His wrath at us, at sin, death, and hell, we look back to the texts that were proclaimed long ago.

Some two thousand eight hundred and fifty years ago, Joel, the man of God, cried out the Word of destruction to a people who had, in thought, word and deed, wandered far from the Lord. God has promised literal fire and brimstone, earthquakes, darkness in sun and moon, dimness in the stars, and an outpouring of His burning anger at sin. They knew the truth about God, that “God threatens to punish all who transgress these commandments. We should therefore fear his wrath and not disobey these commandments”² - though not with those exact words.

¹ Joel 2:13.

²Tappert, T. G. 2000, c1959. *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia

In the words before this Ash Wednesday text, God has just hammered His hearers with words that were echoed some 900 years later, “For the great Day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”³ To those who had been, to this point unrepentant, the prophet had declared the full force of God’s Law. He has declared to them how they have violated His tenfold sure command. They had failed to live up to their covenant, echoed in their creeds. They had faltered in their prayers. They had despised their circumcision and its covenantal blessings. They had overlooked their own sins, refusing to confess and turn from them. They had ritualized the Lord’s sacrifices – 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.

Even so, God does not leave His hearers hanging under the just condemnations that come to those who continue to break His Law. They were to know what you have learned, namely, “On the other hand, [God] promises grace and every blessing to all who keep [His commandments],”⁴ as our text continues:

“Yet even now,” says YHWH, “All of you return to Me in all your hearts, and in fasting, and in weeping, and in mourning.”⁵

³ Revelation 6:17 NKJV

⁴Tappert, T. G. 2000, c1959. *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia

⁵ Joel 2:12.

In the text you have heard read at least twice today, God calls His people to repent. He has given them fair warning. He has repeatedly told, and shown, what happens to those who forsake His grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Yet, even in promising destruction, 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 walk in newness of life, namely, the declaration of the Good News that God is gracious and merciful.⁶

God, through Joel 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.”⁷

In those words, those who would remain God’s people, have Good News. That is, the faithful find that they have God’s strength to confess their sins, and to believe that they receive absolution – forgiveness – not doubting, but firmly believing that their sins are forgiven by God in heaven. It is the Gospel faith, worked in hearts, minds, and souls that moves people to drown their Old Adam with all his sins and evil desires, and allow their New Adams to arise, to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.⁸

With God’s Word of mercy declared, God’s work of grace abounds. That is

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⁷ Joel 2:13.

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He, through the means He chose, works penitential thoughts and words in the faithful, and grants them forgiveness and the ability to do good works. The work of the repentant – symbolized and worked out in the fasting, prayers and almsgiving of this time of the Church Year – is done in the repentant by God’s Holy Word of grace and mercy.

That is to say that it is not the people’s works of penitence, of ashes and the like, that bring God’s pleasure upon them. Rather it is God’s pleasure to work repentance, ashes and the like in His people, to enable them to respond to His grace and mercy. That, as you well know, is the reality that, on His Great and Terrible Day, God poured out His wrath upon Jesus. He allowed His only-begotten Son to bear the full brunt of punishment His people, on account of their sins, deserved. He looked away from the sin that covered the Son – your sin, my sin, the sins of the whole world – and allowed Him to hang accursed upon the tree. God, in His mercy and grace for you, enabled men to kill the Author of Life, to pierce His lifeless side, to make Him the final and ultimate sacrifice for your sins.

Those divine realities you know. Those divine mysteries you confess in the ancient creeds. You are so blessed. You need not wait as the ancients did with the questions posed by Joel hanging over their heads:

“Who knows, He might repent and relent, and cause to leave behind Him blessing,

cereal offering and drink offering to YHWH your God.”⁹

In those words of hopeful promise to a people who had not yet turned from their sins, Joel expects God to be merciful. He looks forward to the Day when God would leave His blessings behind. He names them, cereal and drink offerings.

Perhaps, with the insight of God, Joel knew His words of promise would be fulfilled in the bread and wine of the Table of the Lord. That is the cereal offering – bread, and drink offering – wine, would be given by God someday to His repentant people. The Small Catechism expresses these realities of the cereal and drink offerings of the New Testament with words like these:

What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?

Answer: We are told in the words “for you” and “for the forgiveness of sin.” By these words the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament, for where there is forgiveness of sins, there are also life and salvation.¹⁰

Joel, the man of God in the Old Testament, some 112 years before the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, almost 250 years before the fall of the Southern Kingdom, and over 850 years before the Day of the Lord outside the walls of Jerusalem, believed that God’s revealed merciful and gracious nature would bring repentance, forgiveness and salvation. He declares an Old Testament liturgy for repentance, in order that forgiveness might abound:

⁹ Joel 2:14.

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

“Blow trumpet in Zion, all of you sanctify (a) fast, all of you call (an) assembly.”¹¹

“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.”¹²

“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?”¹³

He calls for a day of repentance. It is to be a day of fasting, in which the assembly of all the people is to be found. They are to be made holy, according to the Old Testament rites of purification. This is to be a community service of ashes and repentance – no one is exempt, and they might be during the feast days. That is, the elderly, the children, the nursing babes must be brought into this fast of repentance. Even those who are rejoicing the most blessed of unions – man and woman in holy matrimony – even they are to leave their newlywed bliss to wear the ashes of mourning over their sins.

Before the assembly of all the people, the congregation of God, the priests who normally performed the sacrifices – the bread and wine offerings, the wave offerings, the thank offerings, the sin offerings, the shedding of gallons and gallons of blood – those men were to weep and lament the sins of the people between the Altar of Sacrifice and the Door to the Holy Place. They were to be the intercessors between a

¹¹ Joel 2:15.

¹² Joel 2:16.

¹³ Joel 2:17.

penitent people and their God whose anger at their sins was a burning fire.

This day, we have the fulfillment of that day long ago, that day of weeping, confessing, ashes, bread and wine. We have one intercessor, Jesus, who stands at the Door of God's Holy Place, Who shed His blood as the Final Sacrifice for sin, who entered into the Presence of the Father having taken His full wrath at sin upon Himself for you, for me, for the whole world! He cried tears, sweat blood. He bore the sting of death in His flesh – for you, on account of His grace and mercy.

From Him God pours forth that mercy upon repentant sinners. The people 2900 years ago had a foretaste of the blessings you have when they repented – for a while. That is what the conclusion of this day's narrative from Joel declares.

*Then YHWH became jealous for His land and He had pity upon His people.¹⁴
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."¹⁵*

The Lord's promise to forgive a repentant people was fulfilled, for the judgment of God was delayed from happening to that generation. The prophet's call to repent - for God is gracious and merciful - worked that which only the Good News can. Today, among all the religions of the world, the Lord's call to His people who come to Him in repentance - whether symbolized with ashes upon the body or not - works His will in turning them, you from sin, to enable you to receive Jesus' perfect

¹⁴ Joel 2:18.

¹⁵ Joel 2:19.

fulfillment of the Law for you. True walking in newness of life – by clinging to the death of Christ for your sins - empowers you to rightly confess your Creator, Savior and Sanctifier. You who have put down the Old Adam, drowning him in the water and Word of your baptisms may rightly call upon God as dear children call upon their dear father. You, in whom the New Man arises out of Baptism, return to the Lord's gifts of grain and wine and continue to receive forgiveness. And, you who have been forgiven, continue to confess your sins and receive God's absolution. You know that these words are for you:

“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.”¹⁶

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 25, 2009

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Translation, second draft:

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²⁰ Joel 2:15.

²¹ Joel 2:16.

²² Joel 2:17.

²³ Joel 2:18.

²⁴ Joel 2:19.