

Weekly Message from Pastor Pook for February 19, 2021

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to our weekly message. It is February 19th. This is the first week of Lent. And today, I'd like to focus on the Ash Wednesday service that we just recently went through, or Ash Wednesday, in general. One of the things about Lent, as well as Advent, but especially during Lent, we change up the worship, or the Divine Service, a little bit. We take out the Alleluias, and so we no longer sing the Alleluia before the Gospel. It's a different phrase. "Return to the Lord, your God," which we find in Joel chapter 2. And that was actually the reading for Ash Wednesday. And we'll talk about that a little bit.

And then we also take out the "Gloria in Excelsis, Glory to God in the Highest," right during the hymn of praise in the beginning of the service. And then we also, rather than sing "Thank You Our God," we sing the "Nunc Dimittis" also because we removed the Alleluias. And we no longer sing the Lord's Prayer every couple of weeks. Everything is just on a more somber and serious note.

As the Treasury of Daily Prayer states it, "Lent and Ash Wednesday. During the 40 days of Lent, God's baptized people cleanse their hearts through the discipline of Lent. Repentance, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Lent is a time in which God's people prepare with joy for the Paschal feast. It is a time in which God renews His people's zeal in faith and life. It is a time in which we pray that we may be given the fullness of grace that belongs to the children of God." So even during this penitential season, even during this time where we focus upon this discipline of repentance and prayer and fasting and almsgiving, it's still a time of faith and life and fullness of grace. There's still joy. It's just a little bit more subdued at this time. Again, it reminds us that we are both sinner and saint at the same time and in need of God's grace. I can't remember if I said this last week, but again, we talk about the Paschal feast, the Paschal lamb, or the Passover lamb. That is the season in the Old Testament, the Passover is what Jesus was celebrating on the Last Supper before He died on the cross and rose on Easter Sunday. And so in most languages, it's called the Paschal feast, or some combination of Passover or Paschal, the Passover lamb, the Paschal lamb. It's all connected to that. Again, in English, for some reason, we change it. Don't know why. But it's all focused upon that event of the Passover.

Now, Joel, chapter 2 "'Yet even now', declares the Lord, 'Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning, and rend your hearts and not your garments.' 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. 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. Blow the trumpet in Zion, consecrate a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the people, consecrate the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bride groom leave his room and the bride her chamber. Between the vestibule and the altar, let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say, 'Spare your people, O Yahweh, and make not Your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?' Then Yahweh became jealous for His land and had pity on His people. Yahweh answered and said to His people, 'Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine and oil, and you will be satisfied and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations.'"

So here we have Joel speaking and prophesying, asking God to deliver us, and telling us, as Christians or as believers, to return to the Lord. Israel had fallen away from God. And Joel is calling them, return to the Lord, your God. And why? Why do we return to God? Why do we constantly come back to God? Because He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. I mean, doesn't that sound like a wonderful thing, to be confident of someone who is the creator of the universe, who is master of all, who is almighty, all-powerful, all-knowing, just and righteous and holy. And yet how He describes Himself in Scripture is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. See, these are the attributes that God wants us to know about Him. These are the attributes that God wants us to believe in

and to hold fast to. Yes, it is true that He is almighty, all-powerful, all-knowing, that He is just and righteous. All of those things are true. And all those things should lead us to tremble in fear because we are none of those things. We are neither righteous, nor just, nor are we all-knowing or all-powerful. And we regularly, regularly, are unholy in our thoughts, our words, and our deeds. And yet, even in spite of all that, God does not want us to fear Him, unless that fear immediately leads us to love Him.

Luther, in the commandments, said we should fear, love and trust in God above all things. The fear of God leads to love. The love of God leads to trust His words. So the fear of God is only there that it might drive us to recognize how loving He is and how caring He is. Because, let's face it. This whole Lenten season and this whole year, for that matter, has made us face our reality, our mortality, in a way that maybe many have not faced in a long time. And a lot of people have responded to that threat to their mortality with fear. They are afraid of everything. And we are creating a nation that is afraid to talk to one another, to assemble together, to be close to one another, because we're all killers because of what we carry. And it has led to fear amongst many people. But we, as Christians, are called to live a life that is without fear because we know very clearly from the very beginning that we're going to die. We know that we are going to die. We confess it every single Sunday. "I, a poor, miserable sinner confess unto You all my sins and iniquities with which I deserve Your temporal and eternal punishment." So we flat out say, "We're sinners. We deserve to die. And we deserve to go to hell." But for the sake of Your son, Jesus Christ, we know that You are gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And so we hold fast to those promises and that hope because that is where the only hope that we have is found.

And so during this Lenten season, I do encourage you to practice devotion, prayer, fasting, almsgiving. Look for opportunities to give a little more generously than you maybe have in the past. Look for opportunities to pray for others, and to pray for our nation, and to pray for our leaders, and our neighbors and our friends that they might know the grace of God. Take the opportunity to try fasting. It's not exactly a discipline that we are familiar with in America, in particular. We're not used to restricting our diets or restricting our lives. But fasting can be a challenging activity. To not eat for 24 hours, that is a real challenge. And you will find out how often you think of food and what it means to you. And if you take that time to pray, perhaps it might lead you to a deeper understanding of the grace of God. I wouldn't do it very often at first. Maybe just skip a meal for the first time, fast for one meal and see how that works. Then maybe try two meals next time and move on like that. But fasting is a discipline that could really be of benefit, in that we learn that we are not slaves to our desires, but we can refrain from our desires for the greater good of knowing God and His salvation in our lives. Again, I don't want to make it a rule. I don't want to make it a judgment. I don't want you to feel obligated to do it. But if it sounds like something that could be interesting to you, I highly encourage you to try.

We thank God that He loves us, that He cares for us, and that He calls us all the time to return to Him. When we receive the ashes on our foreheads, we hear the pastor say, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." And it is a cry of mortality, "You are going to die." That's what it's saying. But those ashes, even though they remind us of our death, are also shaped in the sign of the cross. And in the cross that we receive, we remember our Baptisms when the pastor marked us on the forehead and upon the heart as one redeemed by Christ, and then washed us in the water through the Word of God and we received adoption as His children. That is how we are called to God. And we are always called to return back to our Lord. Remember our baptisms. Remember that we are the children of God and that He loves us and He forgives us. That is what we are called to remember and that is what we are called to share to those around us.

May His grace, mercy and peace be with you always, unto life everlasting. Amen.