

**ASH WEDNESDAY**

Text: Joel 2:12-19; St. Matthew 6:16-21

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

*“Behold, we journey up to Jerusalem”* where they *“kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to her.”* For tonight, we begin our annual Lenten journey of penitence and mourning. We mourn for the guilt of original sin passed down through the generations from Adam and Eve. We mourn for our own guilt earned as a result of our sins, and we mourn especially for what our sins cost our GOD in His merciful act of redemption through His all atoning sacrifice on Calvary’s lonely mountain. It is for this reason, then, that this night, we take up our cross and follow the Man of Sorrows as He makes His journey to the Cross.

You see, as sinners, we were under a curse from which we, on our own, had no hope of escape, *“For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.”* Therefore, on this night, nothing could be more appropriate than the ash upon your forehead in the shape of a cross as a symbol for your sin and your death, but also, your life.

Those who have ashes placed on their foreheads remember first of all, the condemnation due to the stain of sin when GOD sent Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Yet, God did not exile Adam and Eve from paradise without hope; He sent them away with a promise. To the serpent GOD said, *“I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel.”* With these words GOD promised the coming One, the CHRIST, who would one day redeem them from sin and death.

Just as GOD sent Adam and Eve into exile under the shadow of a promised redemption, so today, the ashes of this night fasten our eyes firmly on the Cross and resurrection of JESUS wherein we find GOD’s promise of redemption fulfilled, and our salvation complete.

Remember then, that you are dust. *“For dust you are, And to dust you shall return,”* but by the grace of GOD through JESUS CHRIST, from that same dust you shall be joined together, body and soul, and rise again! Let us then, begin our Lenten journey with subdued joy, for Ash Wednesday is a portal, a door, that opens onto the season of Lent, and Lent is a window and its magnificent vista is nothing less than Easter.

In this we rejoice, for our Lenten journey is not only one of penitence and mourning, but also one of glorious victory and exultation, for our destination is the Cross of JESUS and beyond to His empty tomb. By His innocent suffering and death on the Cross of Calvary we are saved, death conquered, and hell overcome. By His empty tomb and resurrection, our triumph in CHRIST is complete—no one is left to accuse us. Our sins are forgiven and we are free!

So, it is, that we Christians are people who live in the eternal Day of the Resurrection; the Day in which, we await the final fulfillment of all things that we may finally rejoice in the Day

of JESUS CHRIST. As we look forward to this coming Day when JESUS will return on the clouds of Heaven, we prepare for its climactic, annual celebration on Easter morning by way of Lent.

This is a somber preparation because this preparation is a call to repentance, and repentance is the *only* preparation known by the Church. But this repentance does not wear a long face, nor does it make a great show of, or disfigure itself. For we are not in mourning as those who have no hope; we know the end of the story.

Thus, we Christians look to the future with joy. During Lent, our joy may be subdued, but it is joy, nonetheless. We wait in quiet, yet excited, expectation of what will be on the Last Day when our joy will be set free from its restraint at the sound of the last trumpet and rise with shouts of gladness and songs of thanksgiving.

For now, that joy is subdued and set free in short bursts on annual Easter mornings. Because this joy is restrained, its release can be very emotional and moving. Yet, Lent is not for creating warm emotions, not even religious emotions. Neither is Lent an attempt to impress GOD with how much we can do without or how bad we can make ourselves feel. Lent is about a rending of your heart, not your garments. It is a confession that GOD is right and you are wrong. It is about repentance and a reverent recognition of the grace, mercy, and love of our GOD who, for our sake, would take on our flesh to suffer and die in our place.

Our subdued, yet excited joy and expectation know that soon we will find our rest in JESUS. It knows that we shall soon abide in that place where there is no sinful flesh to drag us down; no old Adam within us to be beaten back. It knows that in our place in JESUS only redeemed and sanctified, perfect, risen flesh, washed clean in the Blood of the Lamb, without sinful desires or aches and pains, without sickness and death, with souls that know no loneliness, disappointment, or depression, are to be found there. It is this expectation that gives us strength to lift our ashen heads, for behold, the Day comes when there will be no death, no mourning, no ashes, no sorrow.

This then is the sum total of this day of ashes and season of Lent: Easter is coming. The way of sorrows that our LORD leads us down is not easy nor is it pleasant. Yet, by it, He has gained our salvation; death, hell, and sin have been overcome and the grave is left empty, once—for all.

Now, let us come as the prophet Joel bids us: *“with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning,”* in repentance and quietness. For our GOD is *“gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness.”* Your LORD is zealous for you and has taken pity on you. He has not allowed His SON to die in vain. He has accepted His sacrifice, and plucking you out of the dust, He speaks these words to you: *“I forgive you all your sins.”*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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Rev. Raymond D. Parent II  
Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Crestview, Florida  
2/18/26 A&D