

Looking to Lent: Facing Doubt

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael –March 5 2025

Ash Wednesday

Readings: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 NRSVUE*

Greeting: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you. And also with you. Bless the Lord who forgives all our sins. God's mercy endures for ever.

Prayer: O God, maker of everything and judge of all that you have made, from the dust of the earth you have formed us and from the dust of death you would raise us up. By the redemptive power of the cross, create in us clean hearts and put within us a new spirit, that we may repent of our sins and lead lives worthy of your calling; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition Bible. Our first reading is from Joel chapter 2 verses 1 through 2 and verses 12 through 17.

2 Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—² a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains, a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come. ¹² Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³ rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. ¹⁴ 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? ¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; ¹⁶ gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her canopy. ¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar, let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep. Let them say, "Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?' "
(Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 NRSVUE*)

Our next reading is from 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 20b through chapter 6 verse 10.

^{20b} We entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. **6** As we work together with him, we entreat you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ² For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." Look, now is the acceptable time; look, now is the day of salvation! ³ We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: in great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ in purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷ truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors and yet are true, ⁹ as unknown and yet are well known, as dying and look—we are alive, as punished and yet not killed, ¹⁰ as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing and yet possessing everything. (2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 NRSVUE*)

Our next reading is from Matthew chapter 6 verses 1 through 6 and verses 16 through 21.

6 "Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵ "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹⁶ "And whenever you fast, do not look somber, like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹⁹ "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 NRSVUE*)

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent and as such begins a new series. This week we look at facing doubt. I thought it was appropriate for Ash Wednesday because when we sometimes have to face difficulties in life, our doubt can often overshadow our hope. I could hear that in our reading today. That in Joel, there is the fear that God isn't going to turn back. That maybe God won't leave a blessing for his people. What if our prayers and our fasting are not enough? What if we really are just dust? And I know the question is asked almost rhetorically in Joel, but Joel asks, why should it be said among the peoples, where is their God? And I think sometimes we ask that question because we begin to doubt when things are difficult. It's because when we get into these difficulties, it's easy to doubt that there is good. But I remember that even then, God is there. Sometimes we're just facing the wrong way. We get that kind of strengthening word from 2 Corinthians. That God reaches out to help us. That even in our hardships, our difficulties, we endure. And we endure a lot in life, but we're equipped with ways to deal with it. With love, with kindness, with patience. As for me, I find one of the best ways I have to overcome doubts is with knowledge and with truth. Because even in my greatest doubts and my worries, I remember that God has been there for me. That I have no reason to begin doubting now.

Our doubts can make us question everything. It's the reason that it's important to remember why we do what we do. Because it's easy to doubt when we have a flimsy foundation. That when we hear about how we should behave, it's because we need that firm foundation in faith. We don't practice our righteousness before others, because then our faith is in others and not in God. We don't ask to be praised for giving because we give as a response to Christ's love. And if we remember that, we don't have doubts when we're not praised for those things. Because we're not searching for praise. We don't pray on the street corners, because then we're praying for others. Our prayers are between us and God, because there is no one in between, unless we place them there. All that we do, we do because it is a response to God's love. This sign of ashes is not a sign to signal to others. It is a reminder of our inward struggles. It is a reminder of how we face our doubts. It is a reminder of our mortality and our need for Christ.

I was reminded of our mortality in this very closing of Matthew, that we should not store up treasures here on earth, because they will fade. But what we have in Christ is eternal, overcoming all doubts, all fears, all worries. And that comes with having that foundation. That when we root ourselves in prayer, we are reminded that we are not alone. When we root ourselves in doing the right thing, because it's the right thing, we know that we are not alone. When we remember that we are responding to God's love, we may doubt ourselves, but Christ is still with us. And I tell you what, I may doubt myself, but I don't doubt that Christ is there for me. And that gives me the strength to keep going, because in all of our doubts and our anxieties, Christ is there to comfort us and help us, because we are not told that we face these things alone. We are not told that we have to do everything by ourselves. We are told that Christ is there with us, that the Holy Spirit will guide us out of any difficulty, and that sometimes

we just have to have patience and endurance. And I know it can be hard to be patient. That's why having a foundation in faith is important. And it's why having a family and faith is important. Because we lean upon each other. Because when we lean on each other in Christ, we are strengthened in Christ, and we may lift each other up in Christ. Because that faith together makes us strong. That we may build each other up, and we may help each other in all difficulty.

Because Ash Wednesday is not about doubting our importance. We remember that we serve humbly, because it's not about us. It's about how we live out the greatest commandments that we have been given, to love God and to love one another. We overcome our doubts by working past our fears. We overcome our doubts by remembering that no matter what, Christ is there. That even in the midst of sorrow, we have cause to rejoice. Because no matter where we are, and no matter what troubles we face, we face it together in Christ. Let this Ash Wednesday be a reminder that we always wear the Gospel like a mark for others to see. But they will not see it on our foreheads. They will see it in how we live. They will see it in how we treat others. They will see it in how we overcome our difficulties. And that when we face our doubts, we face them knowing Christ is with us. Amen.

Invitation to the Observance of Lenten Discipline

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:
 the early Christians observed with great devotion
 the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection,
 and it became the custom of the Church that before the Easter celebration
 there should be a forty-day season of spiritual preparation.

During this season converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism.
 It was also a time when persons who had committed serious sins
 and had separated themselves from the community of faith
 were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness,
 and restored to participation in the life of the Church.

In this way the whole congregation was reminded
 of the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ
 and the need we all have to renew our faith.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church,
 to observe a holy Lent:
 by self-examination and repentance;
 by prayer, fasting, and self-denial;
 and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word.

To make a right beginning of repentance,
 and as a mark of our mortal nature,
 let us now kneel before our Creator and Redeemer.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon (Psalm 51 NRSVUE*):

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. ⁵ Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶ You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. ⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. ⁹ Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. ¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶ For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. ¹⁷ The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Looking to Lent

This series is a 5-week series plus Ash Wednesday and in it we will be discussing the various issues we face in life. Lent is a time of reflection and letting go, and as such we will be reflecting on the mindsets we can leave behind this year. We will discuss what we give up and what we take up when we face doubts, temptation, adversity, presumptions, indignation, and expectations during Lent. As we look to Lent, we are reminded that we face everything with Christ.

3/5: Facing Doubt

3/9: Facing Temptation

3/16: Facing Adversity

3/23: Facing Presumptions

3/30: Facing Indignation

4/6: Facing Expectations

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