**The Festival of Ash Wednesday,**

17 February 2021.

*Concordia Lutheran Mission,*

Terrebonne, Oregon.

**“Salvation Comes by the Gospel through Faith**.**”**

And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he *is* gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.

**Joel 2:13**.

**Introduction**.

Here in the prophet Joel the Lord again makes it plain the salvation comes by Grace through faith and not by the works of men. For the Lord had asked the people of Judah to rend their hearts and not their garments. Rending garments is an external act which could be motivated by faith but then again it might not be -- who knows what lies in the heart of a man, although God does[[1]](#footnote-1)1. Rending the heart is a matter of faith.

This faith in the hearts of the men of Judah was fashioned and sustained by the Gospel. For the Lord appeals to His Graciousness and not to the law in order to get the people of Judah to turn from their sinful ways and return to the Lord.

Likewise, the Festival of Ash Wednesday is not about the mere external applications of ashes, an external act like rending one’s garment, but rather about the internal act of faith. Faith lays hold of God’s Graciousness in the Passion of Christ through Gospel and escapes the ashes of death caused by sin.

Salvation and faith come not by men’s works, by mere external acts, but by the Gospel through faith.

**I. The Cross of Christ is God’s Grace Toward Sinners.**

**A.** **God calls men to repentance from the heart.**

Today is the Festival of Ash Wednesday and the beginning of the season of Lent, a penitential season, i.e, a season of repentance .

The application of ashes on the Festival of Ash Wednesday reminds us we are mortal because of sin. Sin ultimately reduces man to the permanent destitution and darkness of death, because sin reduces men to ashes and dust.[[2]](#footnote-2)2 Sin introduced death to mankind and reduced man to dust and ashes.[[3]](#footnote-3)3 Even though Lent is a penitential season and popularly misunderstood to be a season of misery in the Church calendar, it is actually a delightful time because it returns us to God’s boundless Mercy and Grace in Christ and Him Crucified for the sins of all men. God’s Mercy and Grace in Christ refreshes men in this life with God now and unto life eternal, the resurrection of the body, and boundless joys and riches of God’s Everlasting Kingdom.

We gain a glimpse of the dreadful Day of the Lord’s judgment of sin in the days of the prophet Joel. Israel had departed from the Lord in Joel’s day[[4]](#footnote-4)4. The Lord finally sent a great pestilence of locusts to call the people back to His Mercy and Grace in Christ and to reject their false worship and righteousness. This result of their infidelity should have come as no surprise for them. Moses made it plain that were the people to depart from the Lord’s Word, they could expect ill not good. Moses writes:

But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statues which I command thee this day; that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee. ... the LORD shall make the pestilence cleave unto thee, until he have consumed thee from off the land, whither thou goest to possess it.[[5]](#footnote-5)5

In the case of the days of the prophet Joel, it was a tremendous locust plague that beset Israel. The locusts devoured crops and overran homes.[[6]](#footnote-6)6 According to the Law of Moses, the people should know that they had transgressed God’s Word, otherwise this pestilence would not have materialized. Israel would not prosper nor enjoy health nor protection from his enemies were he to depart from Moses but rather would be delivered into the hands of their foes because he had abandoned God’s protection.

The Lord, therefore, calls them to repentance, to rend their hearts and not their garments, in order to avoid further disaster, namely, the destruction of their souls and, more, importantly, the destruction of the Gospel upon which rests the salvation of Israel and all men.

**B. The Cross of Christ is God’s Graciousness.**

God offers them Grace and Mercy in order to deliver them from their errors. The prophet Joel writes:

And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he *is* gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.[[7]](#footnote-7)7

God’s Graciousness and Mercy is the Cross of Christ. The Lord continues:

Who knoweth *if* he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him; *even* a meat offering and a drink offering unto the LORD your God?[[8]](#footnote-8)8

The Lord directs the people of Judah back to the Sacraments of the Old Testament, the Sacrificial System. These Sacraments of the Old Testament actually conveyed to men the Forgiveness of sins won by Christ’s Passion. The Rev. Dr. Edward W. A. Koehler writes:

The sacrifices of the Old Testament could, in themselves, not atone for sin, but being shadows of Christ’s sacrifice, they offered in advance, as it were, to the people that forgiveness of sins which Christ would procure on the cross. Like a check, properly signed and secured by sufficient funds in the bank, is worth all it says, so the Old Testament sacrifices were checks which God himself issued to the people, and which were secured by the treasure Christ earned by His life and death. In appearance they were sacrifices, but in reality they were Sacraments, through which grace and forgiveness was offered to the people.[[9]](#footnote-9)9

But if these institutions of the Old Testament were Sacraments, why were they called sacrifices? They were called sacrifices because they looked forward to the coming Sacrifice of Christ to Atone for the sins of men and save. The Apostle St. Paul writes:

Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or fo the new moon, or of the sabbath *days*: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ.1[[10]](#footnote-10)0

The Sacraments of the Old Testament delivered the Forgiveness of sins that Christ would *procure by His Passion to come*. The Sacraments of the New Testament deliver to men the Forgiveness of sins that *Christ already procured for them on the Cross*. The Grace that God points the people of Judah to in the midst of their calamity caused by their disobedience is the Cross of Christ, who Atoned for their sins and the sins of all men on the Cross.

The Cross of Christ is the Graciousness of God that delivered the people of Judah and, indeed, all men, from the calamity of their sin.

**II. The Gospel Saves by Grace through Faith**.

**A. The Gospel changes the heart.**

The Gospel changes the heart and produces true repentance because the Gospel creates in the heart faith. The Apostle St. Paul writes:

So then faith *cometh* by hearing and hearing by the word of God.1[[11]](#footnote-11)1

Again, the Apostle St. Paul writes:

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.1[[12]](#footnote-12)2

Outward conduct like rending one’s garments to show remorse and the imposition of ashes to show penitence may or may not indicate a penitent heart. Who knows what lies in the hearts of men? The Pharisees, for example, had splendid outward displays, but inside were unbelieving, rotten, and evil. Jesus says:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead *men’s* bones, and of all uncleanness.1[[13]](#footnote-13)3

As we see from Jesus’ Words, only true repentance inwardly and outwardly is acceptable to God because that alone rests on the Righteousness of the Cross of Christ.

The Gospel of God’s Grace and Mercy of the Cross creates faith in the heart and creates true repentance in the hearts of men.

**B. The Gospel saves.**

Because the Gospel changes the hearts of men and turns them from sin to God’s Righteousness in Christ-Crucified, the Gospel saves. The prophet Joel writes:

And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he *is* gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil. Who knoweth *if* he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him; *even* a meat offering and drink offering unto the LORD your God?1[[14]](#footnote-14)4

Likewise the Gospel works Salvation for all men. The Evangelist St. Luke writes:

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. And the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, *even* as many as the Lord our God shall call.1[[15]](#footnote-15)5

**Conclusion**.

The Lord in the book of the prophet Joel the Lord again makes it plain the salvation comes by Grace through faith and not by the works of men. For the Lord had asked the people of Judah to rend their hearts and not their garments. Rending garments is an external act -- just as is the imposition of Ashes on Ash Wednesday -- which could be motivated by faith but then again it might not be -- who knows what lies in the heart of a man, although God does. Rending the heart is a matter of faith.

This faith in the hearts of the men, whether Judah or anyone else, was fashioned and sustained by the Gospel. For the Lord appeals to His Graciousness of the Gospel of the Cross of Christ and not to the law in order to inspire the people of Judah to turn from their sinful ways and return to the Lord. Because the Gospel works change from the inside out, it saves and gives life everlasting.

Salvation and faith come not by men’s works, by mere external acts, but by the Gospel through faith.

***Amen.***

1. 1“For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? een so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.” **I Corinthians 2:11**.

   “I the LORD search the heart, *I* try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, *and* according to the fruit of his doings.” **Jeremiah 17:10**.

   “**V. 12. Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to Me with all your heart, in**, in a true repentance, **and with fasting and with weeping and with mourning**, as outward indications of the change of heart ... .” The Rev. Dr. P. E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible, The Old Testament*, Vol. II, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1924, 653 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2“The ancient act [of the imposition of ashes] is a gesture of repentance and a powerful reminder about the meaning of the day. Ashes can symbolize dust-to-dustness ... .” The Rev. James L. Brauer, *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, editor, the Rev. Dr. Fred L. Precht, Authorized by The Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, p. 166.

   “And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which *am but* dust and ashes ... .” **Genesis 18:27**. “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it was thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return.” **Genesis 3:19**. Hence, we read in **The Order for the Burial of the Dead**, “FORASMUCH as it hath pleased Almighty God, in His wise providence, to take out of this world the soul of our departed *brother*, we therefore commit his body to the ground (to God’s acre); earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in the hope of the resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change our vile body that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself.” *The Lutheran Agenda*, p. 95, underscore added. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3“Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned ... .” **Romans 5:12**. “... till thou return unto the ground; for out of it was thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return.” **Genesis 3:19**. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 4“Joel was active probably during the first two decades of Joash’s reign (877-837 [BC]), while the latter was under the guidance of the priest Jehoiada (2 Kings 11:12) ... .” The Rev. Dr. Theodore Laetsch, *Bible Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, no date, p. 112, amplification in brackets added. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 5**Deuteronomy 28:15**, **21**. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 6“The first swarms of locusts in February, 1915, came ‘in such thick clouds as to obscure the sun for the time being’ (*National Geographic* *Magazine*, 1014, p. 513). And later the newly developed fliers passed over the Jordan Valley ‘in clouds sufficiently dense to darken the sun’ (p. 544). ‘The morning,’ literally, the dawn; picturing either there swift advance, as the morning light speeds from crag to crag; or their greater number; or the semidarkness of the twilight, the dusk preceding the brightness of the day. ‘Great,’ ‘strong,’ both terms denote numerical or physical strength, their great number and their power to destroy. ... ‘Disastrous as they were in the country, equally obnoxious they become about the homes, crawling up thick upon the walls and squeezing in through cracks of closed doors or windows, entering the very dwelling rooms. – Women frantically swept the walls and roofs of their homes, but to no avail. – They even fell into one’s shirt collar from the walls above. – A lady, after being away from home for half a day, returned with 110 of them concealed within the skirts. Whenever touched, or especially when finding themselves caught within one’s clothes, they exuded from their mouths a dark fluid, an irritant to the skins and soiling the garments in a most disgusting manner. Imagine the feeling (we speak from experience) with a dozen or two such creatures over an inch long, with sawlike legs and rough bodies, making a race course of your back! ... So faithful is Joel’s account that even today its accuracy and vividness is freely acknowledged. In the December, 1915, issue of *The National Geographic Magazine* (XXVIII, NO. 6) John D. Whiting writes of an interesting manner an eyewitness account of a similar locust plague covering all of Palestine and Syria, from the border of Egypt to the Taurus Mountains. After quoting Joel 1:2-6 he begins his article: ‘Thus Joel, writing some seven or eight hundred years B. C., begins his description of a locust plague, which then as now must have laid waste this land. We marvel how this ancient writer could have given so graphic and true a description of a devastation caused by locusts in so condensed a form’ (p. 511).” *Bible Commentary: The Minor Prophets*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, no date, pp. 119, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 7**Joel 2:13**. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 8**Joel 2:14**. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 9The Rev. Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism, Edited by the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and other States, with Additional Notes for Students, Teachers, and Pastors* *by Edward W. A. Koehler*, Ft. Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1981, p. 148.

   “Also circumcision and the Passover were, ever since their institution, means of grace for the period of the Old Testament. ... On this account Luther says: ‘It is not true that the Sacraments of the New Testament differ from the Sacraments of the Old Testament as to their signification’ [namely, as God-appointed signs of the *grace* of God] .... ‘Both our and the fathers’ signs or Sacraments have a word of promise attached which calls for faith and can be fulfilled by no other work. therefore they are signs or Sacraments of justification.’ ... Both through the Word about the coming Messiah and through circumcision and the Passover, the Sacraments of the Old Testament, the remission of sins was given and, by the believers, appropriated.” The Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. I, pp. 214, 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 10**Colossians 2:16-17**. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 11**Romans 10:17**. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 12**Galatians 3:26-27**. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 13**St. Matthew 23:27**. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 14**Joel 2:13**. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 15**Acts 2:38-39**. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)