



Introduction

On Ash Wednesday we begin our forty-day journey toward Easter with a day of fasting and repentance. Marking our foreheads with dust, we acknowledge that we die and return to the earth. At the same time, the dust traces the life-giving cross indelibly marked on our foreheads at baptism. While we journey through Lent to return to God, we have already been reconciled to God through Christ. We humbly pray for God to make our hearts clean while we rejoice that “now is the day of salvation.” Returning to our baptismal call, we more intentionally bear the fruits of mercy and justice in the world.

Psalm 51:1-17

- ¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.
- ²**Wash me through and through from my wickedness,
and cleanse me from my sin.**
- ³For I know my offenses, and my sin is ever before me.
- ⁴**Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are justified when you speak and right in your judgment.**
- ⁵Indeed, I was born steeped in wickedness, a sinner from my mother’s womb.
- ⁶**Indeed, you delight in truth deep within me,
and would have me know wisdom deep within.**
- ⁷Remove my sins with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be purer than snow.
- ⁸**Let me hear joy and gladness; that the body you have broken may rejoice.**
- ⁹Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my wickedness.
- ¹⁰**Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.**
- ¹¹Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
- ¹²**Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.**
- ¹³Let me teach your ways to offenders, and sinners shall be restored to you.
- ¹⁴**Rescue me from bloodshed, O God of my salvation,
and my tongue shall sing of your righteousness.**
- ¹⁵O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.
- ¹⁶**For you take no delight in sacrifice, or I would give it.
You are not pleased with burnt offering.**
- ¹⁷The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit;
a troubled and broken heart, O God, you will not despise.

Prayer of the Day

Gracious God, out of your love and mercy you breathed into dust the breath of life, creating us to serve you and our neighbors. Call forth our prayers and acts of kindness, and strengthen us to face our mortality with confidence in the mercy of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

First Reading: Isaiah 58:1-12

Shortly after the return of Israel from exile in Babylon, the people were troubled by the ineffectiveness of their fasts. God reminds them that outward observance is no substitute for genuine fasting that results in acts of justice, such as feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and clothing the naked. Sincere repentance will lead to a dramatic improvement of their condition.

Read the text [here](#).

Gospel: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commends almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, but emphasizes that spiritual devotion must not be done for show.

Read the text [here](#).

Reflection on the Text

After the Ash Wednesday service, a little girl went home and was looking for some toys she had misplaced...until she came rushing into the kitchen and announced to her parents, "There's somebody under my bed!" Her parents replied, "Surely not," but she insisted, "I promise! Come see!" So the parents dutifully followed her and knelt down and looked under the bed, and of course, nobody was there. Still the little girl persisted, pointing to a dust bunny under the bed, "Don't you remember what the pastor said at church? "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." So that must be somebody; I just can't tell if he's coming or going!"

Perhaps even on this most solemn day of the church year, a little levity is in order, at least in the sense of our not taking ourselves too seriously. Amid all the nostalgias and successes and guilts and disappointments of our past, all the worries of our present, and all the fears of the unknown as well as dreams and hopes for the future, a word of deep honesty confronts us and shakes us with this poignant reminder:

“From the dust of the ground you were made in our ancestor Adam, and to dust you shall return.” Taking yourself too seriously? Think again! Dust Bunnies. That’s what we are...

So laying up treasures on earth is ultimately futile. The stock market is skyrocketing right now, but many of us know firsthand what it’s like to watch your nest egg, your security, go the opposite direction. But treasures aren’t limited to finances. All of us have, to one degree or another, watched dreams, health, relationships, hopes, predictability, stability consumed by moths and rust.

Ash Wednesday and Lent are, if nothing else, reality therapy. No matter how you might spin alternative facts and fake news, Lent speaks a sobering promise amid 500,000 deaths in 11 months to Covid alone: You and I will die. Despite that brutal liturgical honesty, the word “Lent” derives from a happy source, the old Anglo-Saxon word “Lenc-ten,” our English word lengthen, literally meaning springtime, as the days lengthen.

If we carry that image forward, Lent call us to a sort of “spring cleaning,” a taking of inventory, tossing out those priorities and practices that separate us from God and each other and taking on the spiritual disciplines that help us live into our identity in Christ. Jesus calls us to put our heart where our true treasure is. Not the other way around, mind you.

Most of us hear that passage, “Where your heart is, there will your treasure be,” so get your heart right. That’s not at all what it says; in fact, just the opposite! “Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also.” It’s a Gospel promise. Put your treasure in the way of Jesus, and your heart will follow. Lent bids us to “return to the Lord our God,” to “rend our hearts and not our garments,” to do some deep inventory as to what and where our treasure is, what we value and believe and rely on above all else so that our hearts can follow.

In terms of these bodies, and 401K’s, and serving of self as the ultimate value, Lent says, “that’s all going.” In terms of discipleship, taking up our cross, and following in the way of Christ, that’s all coming back to Christ. Lent reminds us to look to our baptism into Christ, to our identity as God’s chosen, loved, precious, forgiven children and from that identity to say “NO” to those things that drive a wedge between us and God’s intention for our lives and “YES” to nurturing our relationship with God in regular prayer, scripture reading, worship, giving of ourselves, and in service to others.

Lent reminds us that even as winter can be gloomy and some years seemingly interminable, Spring is around the corner, new life, new birth. Yes, apart from Christ, dust bunnies, that’s all. Ashes. But just as in Adam who came from dust, so our bodies return to it, in Christ just as all die all will be made alive. . .

So. . . coming, or going? In relationship with Christ, I mean. Take stock of how individually and corporately we have wandered, and come home. “Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” Amen.

Listen and sing along [here](#).

Invitation to Lent

Friends in Christ, today with the whole church we enter the time of remembering Jesus' passover from death to life, and our life in Christ is renewed.

We begin this holy season by acknowledging our need for repentance and for God's mercy. We are created to experience joy in communion with God, to love one another, and to live in harmony with creation. But our sinful rebellion separates us from God, our neighbors, and creation, so that we do not enjoy the life our creator intended.

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to a discipline that contends against evil and resists whatever leads us away from love of God and neighbor. I invite you, therefore, to the discipline of Lent—self-examination and repentance, prayer and fasting, sacrificial giving and works of love—strengthened by the gifts of word and sacrament. Let us continue our journey through these forty days to the great Three Days of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Confession of Sin

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another.

Most holy and merciful God,
**we confess to you and to one another,
and before the whole company of heaven,
that we have sinned by our fault, by our own fault,
by our own most grievous fault, in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done and by what we have left undone.**

We have not loved you with our whole heart, and mind, and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven.
Have mercy on us, O God.

We have shut our ears to your call to serve as Christ served us. We have not been true to the mind of Christ. We have grieved your Holy Spirit. **Have mercy on us, O God.**

Our past unfaithfulness, the pride, envy, hypocrisy, and apathy that have infected our lives, we confess to you. **Have mercy on us, O God.**

Our self-indulgent appetites and ways, and our exploitation of other people, we confess to you. **Have mercy on us, O God.**

Our negligence in prayer and worship, and our failure to share the faith that is in us, we confess to you. **Have mercy on us, O God.**

Our neglect of human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty, we confess to you. **Have mercy on us, O God.**

Our false judgments, our uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors, and our prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us, we confess to you.
Have mercy on us, O God.

Our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us, we confess to you. **Have mercy on us, O God.**

Restore us, O God, and let your anger depart from us.
Hear us, O God, for your mercy is great.

Imposition of Ashes

If you have a Lenten resource bag, you may sprinkle some of the palm ash on the top of your head, or make a small cross on your forehead with ash at this time. If you do not have a resource bag, we suggest tracing a cross on your forehead with water.

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Accomplish in us, O God, the work of your salvation,
that we may show forth your glory in the world.
By the cross and passion of your Son, our Savior,
bring us with all your saints to the joy of his resurrection.

Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us all our sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen us in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep us in eternal life.
Amen.

Let us pray.

Merciful God, accompany our journey through these forty days. Renew us in the gift of baptism, that we may provide for those who are poor, pray for those in need, fast from self-indulgence, and above all that we may find our treasure in the life of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come,
thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.**

Blessing

You are what God made you to be:
created in Christ Jesus for good works,
chosen as holy and beloved,
freed to serve your neighbor.
God bless you ✝ that you may be a blessing,
in the name of the holy and life-giving Trinity.
Amen.

Sending Hymn ELW #608 / WOV # 734 *Softly and Tenderly, Jesus is Calling*

Listen and sing along [here](#).

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Today's reflection was written by NC Synod Bishop Tim Smith.