

Sermon and Prayers for the Ash Wednesday + February 17, 2021  
Bishop Bill Gafkjen, Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA

**Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**

<sup>1</sup>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—  
<sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>12</sup>Yet even now, says the Lord,  
return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
<sup>13</sup>rend your hearts and not your clothing.

Return to the Lord, your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
and relents from punishing.  
<sup>14</sup>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?

<sup>15</sup>Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
sanctify a fast;  
call a solemn assembly;  
<sup>16</sup>gather the people.  
Sanctify the congregation;  
assemble the aged;  
gather the children,  
even infants at the breast.  
Let the bridegroom leave his room,  
and the bride her canopy.

<sup>17</sup>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?’ ”

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

[Jesus said to the disciples:] <sup>1</sup>“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

<sup>2</sup>“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. <sup>3</sup>But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>5</sup>“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. <sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>16</sup>“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup>But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup>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.

<sup>19</sup>“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup>but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

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Grace, mercy, and peace be yours in abundance, dear people of God, from God our creator, through the Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen

And from your other 45,000 or so siblings who are part of some 180 congregations, ministries, and agencies spread across the territory of this synod, greetings and a subdued Lenten woohoo in the name of Jesus!

“Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

We have heard the echo of this daunting declaration of our dust-borne origins and dustbin destiny over and again and in so many ways during our now year-long pilgrimage through the coronavirus wilderness.

The ashes of our frail, failing mortality have been imposed on us again and again...and some of ashes and dust are of our own making.

500,000 – half a million – dead from the pandemic in this country alone, not to mention the millions of family members and friends from whom these loved ones have been bereaved.

Thousands more whose lives have been detoured and distorted by the virus and its collateral damage...lost jobs, lost time, lost futures and dreams...

The fault lines of our life together in church and society have emerged and shifted into violence and viciousness and vitriol.

In so many places and relationships the depths of our inequities and iniquities have been revealed. While some of us are trying to address them, others of us have turned on one another and our ministers and leaders.

The ashes of our frail, failing mortality have been imposed on us again and again...and some of the ashes and dust are of our own making.

And so, this day, we yet again trace the baptismal mark of Christ with the dust of our days.

Thus marked, we embark on the next 40-day leg of our journey through the wilderness and the ancient prophet Joel calls us to lament and repent. The prophet calls us to remember that we are dust and will return to dust AND to remember that the God who is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,” the very God who created us from the dust, and walks with us through the dust, also offers mercy and grace, forgiveness and new life in the dust of our days as it mingles with water from the wounded side of the crucified and risen Christ, becoming the dust of new life from which we are formed and made new.

We lament; we cry out to God; we weep with one another as we name and share the weight of the losses, the deaths, the diminished dreams imposed on us.

We repent; we confess to God; we own up to one another as we name and share the weight of the sins, the neglect of neighbors, the disrespect, dismissal, and demeaning of others that are of our own making.

We return again to the foot of the cross and the mouth of the empty tomb. We walk with and to Jesus, crucified and risen for us, for the world.

How might we lament this holy season?

Perhaps by journaling our sorrows or writing and praying prayers like those of the biblical psalmists, who did not hold back on sharing with God their anger, disappointment, and grief.

Perhaps we lament these next few weeks through Zoom or FaceTime or over the phone or socially distanced through masks with friends and family, those whom we know will listen deeply and hold us in their hearts, even as we do the same for them.

In worship, dwelling in scripture, in sessions with ministers or counselors or spiritual directors...these forty days we remember we are dust and lament.

So also, we repent.

We might journal our sins and failings, write or pray prayers of confession, use words from liturgies old and new.

We might repent these next few weeks by confessing what we have done to those we have hurt, drawing closer to those we've rejected, toning down our rhetoric and cranking up our mercy and grace with those with whom we disagree.

In worship, dwelling in scripture, in seeking to restore, reconcile, or renew what we've broken...these forty days we remember we are dust and repent.

And we remember that we do not go alone. We entrust ourselves to the promise of healing, the gift of hope, and the profound possibility of new, abundant, and lasting life that pour from the sin-scarred hands of the crucified and risen Christ, the embodiment of gracious, steadfast love that promises resurrection rising from the dust and ashes of our days.

Dear child of God, trace again the baptismal mark on your brow and remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return...and from dust you shall be raised.

Thanks be to God.

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### **Lamentation, Confession, and Assurance of Mercy and Forgiveness**

*All may make the sign of the cross, the sign marked at baptism, as the presiding minister begins.*

Blessed be the holy Trinity,  $\ddagger$  one God, the keeper of the covenant, the source of steadfast love, our rock and our redeemer.

**Amen.**

God hears us when we cry and draws us close in Jesus Christ. Let us return to the one who is full of compassion.

*Silence is kept for reflection.*

Fountain of living water,

**pour out your mercy over us.**

**Our grief is deep, we long for relief.**

**Our sin is heavy, and we long to be free.**

**Bring comfort, hope and healing to broken hearts;**

**grant new dreams and new life from the dust.**

**Rebuild what we have ruined and mend what we have torn.**

**Comfort and heal us in your love.**

**Wash us in your cleansing flood.**

**Make us alive in the Spirit**

**to follow in the way of Jesus,**

**as healers and restorers of the world you so love.**

**Amen.**

Beloved, God's word never fails.

The promise rests on grace:

by the saving love of Jesus Christ,

the wisdom and power of God,

the steadfast mercy of God surround and fill you,

your sins are  $\ddagger$  forgiven, and God remembers them no more.

Journey in the way of Jesus.

**Amen.**

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