



GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH

OF SOUTH BURNABY, BC

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN CANADA

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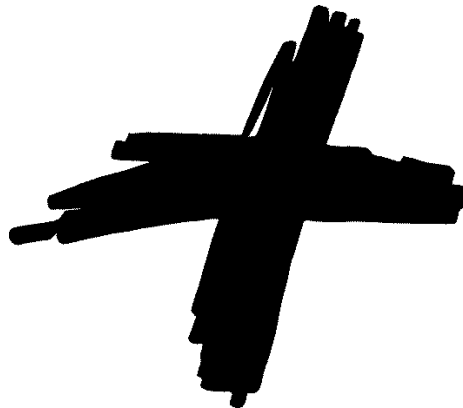
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**Ash Wednesday
February 14, 2024**

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.

A warm welcome to those who are here worshipping with us in-person and to those on-line. Here at Grace Lutheran we believe God is active in your life. Even you being here now is testament of God's calling and leading in your heart, which you have faithfully heeded. So we welcome you, and pray that today you will be nurtured and that the gifts that God has graciously given you will be stirred for the sake of God's mission in the world.

Grace Lutheran worships, prays, and serves on the traditional and unceded lands and territories of the hən̓q̓əmiñəm̓ (Musqueam) and Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) peoples.

GATHERING

CALL TO WORSHIP: PSALM 51:1–17

- ¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.
- ²Wash 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.
- ⁴Against 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.
- ⁶Indeed, 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.
- ⁸Let 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.
- ¹⁰Create 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.
- ¹²Restore 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.
- ¹⁴Rescue 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.
- ¹⁶For 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.

GREETING

The humbling grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the redeeming love of God,
and the supportive fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
And also with you.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Almighty and ever-living God, you hate nothing you have made, and you forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and honest hearts, so that, truly repenting of our sins, we may receive from you, the God of all mercy, full pardon and forgiveness through your Son, Jesus

Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

WORD

FIRST READING: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

A reading from Joel.

Because of the coming day of the LORD, the prophet Joel calls the people to a community lament. The repentant community declares that God is gracious and asks God to spare the people lest the nations doubt God's power to save.

¹Blow 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—
²a 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.

¹²Yet even now, says the LORD,
 return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
 ¹³rend 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.

¹⁴Who 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?

¹⁵Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
 ¹⁶gather 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.

¹⁷Between 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?’ ”

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

SECOND READING: 2 Corinthians 5:20b--6:10

A reading from 2 Corinthians.

The ministry of the gospel endures many challenges and hardships. Through this ministry, God’s reconciling activity in the death of Christ reaches into the depths of our lives to bring us into a right relationship with God. In this way, God accepts us into the reality of divine salvation.

^{20b}We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

^{6:1}As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.

²For he says,

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ³We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION (p. 252)

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

The holy gospel according to Matthew.

Glory to you, O Lord.

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

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹“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.

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. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so 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. ⁶But 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 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. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so 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; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

SERMON

By the power of your Spirit, O God, may our ears be opened to hear your word and our hearts softened to receive your love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Well... I'm just going to say it. Attending an Ash Wednesday service has to be the least romantic way to spend Valentine's Day ever. Well, since 2018 at least, which was the last time these two days coincided. I don't know if there is another more contrasting and completely polar opposite pair of days that could land on the same day like Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day, except for maybe when Easter lands on April Fool's Day. Unless, of course, if you can imagine Jesus popping out of the tomb yelling "Fooled you! Didn't stay dead."

But for today, Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day, I don't know if we can really stretch out a connection like that. They are so different from each other. I mean Ash Wednesday is about self reflection, while Valentine's Day is more about expressing your love to another. Ash Wednesday is about remembering our mortality and limited time on Earth while Valentine's Day is about wanting to be with someone else for as long as possible. Ash Wednesday is about repentance from sin and changing from our unrighteous ways while Valentine's Day is about... oh wait maybe there is a connection after all.

Of course, I'm joking. Although relationships do seem to be like that these days, at least the ones we see as portrayed in media. What I mean is that relationships these days seem like they're all about saying sorry, making up after a fight, and doing everything you can, even as far as completely changing yourself, to be with the other person. To be honest, I don't think that's really what relationships are supposed to be about. They're supposed to be about mutual care and respect for each other, a commitment to stay connected as companions, and having an appreciation for the other as they are for who they are, not what they should be because we want them to, regardless of what the musical-turned-movie-starring-John-Tavolta-and-Olivia-Newton-John Grease has taught us. Relationships, at least the kind that I feel should be celebrated on Valentine's Day, should be about love, commitment, and respect, not trying to change the other so they can be more loved by you.

But that is what Christianity seems to be like for many people as well, doesn't it? In that it I feel as though a lot of people would say Christianity is about changing someone or being changed. We have to be a certain way to be accepted, live a certain kind of life and don't live another more fun kind. I mean

we're given these 10 rules to follow, which lead to a plethora of sub-rules that we also should follow to ensure we don't break those original 10. And along the way we're given more rules, more guidelines, more laws that we must keep or else we might face some weeping and gnashing of teeth.

It's like Christianity in general has a "be good, or else" kind of feel to it.

Again, at least that's what how the media portrays it. And that's how the masses outside of the church, and some inside the church seem to think as well. Maybe this is why church attendance is on the decline everywhere, the stigma around organised religion being about control, forced change, and manipulation.

Let's be honest, don't the readings that we get for this Ash Wednesday, the same readings that we get every year, seem to support this? Very clearly Jesus is giving his disciples instruction on what *not* to do, lest they be seen to be like the hypocrites. They have to make sure they don't act a certain way or else they won't receive their reward. Make sure they're good, or they just won't get good.

It's hard to argue with that as it seems so clear in the text. And then we get this season of Lent that this day kicks off, a season of scarcity and discipline. Religious tradition would have us "fasting" from something until it hurts. Be it our favourite food, drink, or dessert, the idea is to give it up for these 40 days until Easter.

So it's like we have to give and give and change and change in order to be righteous. We have to be disciplined and strict in order to be good. We have to fit that pious mold that doesn't really look like how we are normally, in order to be loved by God and welcomed into this community.

And I guess that's why this day and this season aren't exactly on the top of the popularity charts. That could be why we get so few out for this service year after year. Perhaps this is the reason that Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day don't really seem to jive all that much.

One is just about fun for couples in love, and the other just sucks.

Well, it sucks if you see it as this sort of dysfunctional relationship, that is. Christianity is hard if it is seen as a give and take sort of thing. Ash Wednesday is a tough day to observe if we just see it as not just a reminder of our mortality, but also a reminder of our shortcomings and our shame.

But yet, we're here. Here in the space or watching online, we are here. In spite of the stigma around this day and this season, we decided to come out anyway. Even when the readings today specifically tell us not to flaunt our religious discipline, we will be having our foreheads clearly marked in ash a sign of the cross. Even though this day, this religion, this way of life seems to be not in our best interests in this day and age, we have chosen to observe and participate in this day.

And above all, we will yet again be reminded that we are from dust and to dust we shall return.

Still, we come. Still, we make our way out this evening for this service. Still, we show up.

Maybe it's because there is just something about the ashes that draw us back to ancient times. The ancient practice of throwing ashes over your body as a sign of lament, change, and renewal. The ashes symbolise a death of course, but a death of what was holding us back from seeing, feeling, and loving.

See the ashes are a symbol of a complete turn around in paradigm and practice, of a realisation of something wrong in our lives, of repentance and rebirth.

And that is what Ash Wednesday is about. It's not about changing for the sake of change, or reluctantly being a certain way to appease someone else, or especially not showing off the ash cross on our heads. But it's about seeing what habits or practices are harmful to us, recognising how we aren't perfect, and turning away from the shame and guilt and into God's everlasting arms of love.

See we are reminded of our mortality in this season. We have but one life to live. This life is meant to be full of love, community, and to just be the life that truly is life, but it sometimes is squandered away by things that might not carry the same meaning as we would think they would. And so this day and season is meant to help us learn to shed these things. Shed these things not out of reluctant obligation or even as a prerequisite for salvation, but because it is good for us, good for our community, good for us to further embrace the life that God has intended for us.

So the shame that we have of not being perfect is removed. The guilt that might come with not being 100% righteous is lifted. The sin of not living life as God has intended is forgiven. And in spite of us not always getting it, even though we might still flaunt when we shouldn't flaunt or boast when we should boast, while we continue to live in our sin, guilt, and shame, we are saved.

Saved even when we are in sin. Redeemed even when we aren't righteous. Loved even when we are unlovable. And that is the great and confusing dichotomy of our faith, that we can be saint and sinner at the same time. That God's Word can be both law and gospel. That this cross can be a tool for death but be a symbol for life.

As Father Mike Schmitz of YouTube fame said about the ashes, "the ashes mean I'm a sinner, but the cross means that I have a Saviour."

So yes, Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day have nothing in common. Ash Wednesday is so much better. Thanks be to God. Amen.

HYMN OF THE DAY: I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say (#611)

INVITATION TO LENT (p. 252)

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 (p. 252)

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 (p. 254)

Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth.

May these ashes be a sign of our mortality and penitence, reminding us that only by the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ are we given eternal life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

HYMN: Change My Heart, O God (#801)

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.

PRAYER (p. 254)

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 (p. 112)

Gathered into one by the Holy Spirit, let us pray as Jesus taught us.

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.**

Give us today our daily bread.

**Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those
who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.**

SENDING

BLESSING (p. 255)

May God our Maker bless you and keep you,
may Christ our Redeemer's light break forth like the dawn to shine on you and be gracious unto you,
and may the Spirit our Sustainer look upon you with favour and bring you healing and peace.
Amen.

DISMISSAL

Go in peace, be of good courage.

Thanks be to God.