

# Wednesday, February 17, 2021

## Ash Wednesday, Year B

### 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.**

### First Reading: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

*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.*

<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?'"

## Psalm: Psalm 51:1-17

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. (Ps. 51:1)*

<sup>1</sup>Have mercy on me, O God, according to your | steadfast love;  
in your great compassion blot out | my offenses.  
<sup>2</sup>**Wash me through and through | from my wickedness,  
and cleanse me | from my sin.**  
<sup>3</sup>For I know | my offenses,  
and my sin is ev- | er before me.  
<sup>4</sup>**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. R**  
<sup>5</sup>Indeed, I was born | steeped in wickedness,  
a sinner from my | mother's womb.  
<sup>6</sup>**Indeed, you delight in truth | deep within me,  
and would have me know wisdom | deep within.**  
<sup>7</sup>Remove my sins with hyssop, and I | shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be pur- | er than snow.  
<sup>8</sup>**Let me hear | joy and gladness;  
that the body you have broken | may rejoice. R**  
<sup>9</sup>Hide your face | from my sins,  
and blot out | all my wickedness.  
<sup>10</sup>**Create in me a clean | heart, O God,  
and renew a right spir- | it within me.**  
<sup>11</sup>Cast me not away | from your presence,  
and take not your Holy Spir- | it from me.  
<sup>12</sup>**Restore to me the joy of | your salvation  
and sustain me with your boun- | tiful Spirit. R**  
<sup>13</sup>Let me teach your ways | to offenders,  
and sinners shall be re- | stored to you.  
<sup>14</sup>**Rescue me from bloodshed, O God of | my salvation,**

**and my tongue shall sing | of your righteousness.**

<sup>15</sup>O Lord, o- | pen my lips,  
and my mouth shall pro- | claim your praise.

<sup>16</sup>**For you take no delight in sacrifice, or | I would give it.  
You are not pleased | with burnt offering.**

<sup>17</sup>The sacrifice of God is a | troubled spirit;  
a troubled and broken heart, O God, you will | not despise. **R**

## **Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:20b--6:10**

*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.*

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

<sup>6:1</sup>As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. <sup>2</sup>For 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! <sup>3</sup>We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, <sup>4</sup>but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, <sup>5</sup>beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; <sup>6</sup>by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, <sup>7</sup>truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; <sup>8</sup>in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; <sup>9</sup>as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; <sup>10</sup>as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

## **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.*

[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.”

## Sermon

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  
Amen

Tonight we stand at the threshold, the very doorstep, of Lent. We do it distanced from one another. We gather virtually. Right now it is what we must do given the world in which we live. It has been nearly one year since our world shut down for six weeks and we all learned about quarantine and how COVID19 might spread and all its symptoms, etc. Almost one year...and counting.

We truly believe that the worst is behind us, but we also know that the next few months may be critical as vaccinations take place and as variants of the virus may prove a source of concern.

Yet, we gather together tonight as Christians around the world gather to worship and look forward to the season of Lent always with an eye to Easter Sunday and the major celebration of the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Why Lent? Well, Lent exists to prepare us to experience the central story of our universe and the defining story of our lives, which is the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And this story is one that is experienced, not simply heard, because Jesus so identifies himself with us in baptism that he draws us with him through death into eternal life.

Lent helps us slough off competing embraces, trade our notions of glory, power, and security for God's; and build confidence in the dependability of God's promises.

Our gospel text tonight from the Sermon on the Mount addresses three of the central disciplines of Lent: sharing with others in need, prayer, and fasting. These words of Jesus are a call to a fourth Lenten discipline: self-examination. And he warns against doing all of these to be seen by others, or to prove our goodness to God or to ourselves.

Our first lesson from the prophet Joel speaks to those who come to Lent out of fear, propelled by suffering that seems like punishment. In our world today economic downturns or loss of beloved people or associations stand side by side with the approach of locusts in Joel's time. Our text assures us of God's love and urges us to pray and behave as if we needed to remind God of that love, as well as remind ourselves.

Paul reminds the Corinthians of the identification with Christ - our sin becomes his, and his righteousness ours; his new life involves not only joy and fulfillment but suffering that benefits others. And maybe most important - Paul reminds us that we may not have forever to grasp and explore this identification - we are limited by death - but we do have now, right now. This very truth from Paul is what lies behind - "you are dust and to dust you shall return."

The Dalai Lama said, "There are only two days in the year that nothing can be done. One is called yesterday and the other day is called tomorrow, so today is the right day to love, believe, do, and mostly live." St. Paul says that another way: "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation."

Today, Ash Wednesday, all time collapses into the present moment of a cross inscribed on our foreheads, which reveals our sinfulness and our future mortality, and that cross on our foreheads stands alongside of the cross of salvation won for us in the death and resurrection of Christ, which is also the very promise of eternal life into the future.

Paul's words: "now is the acceptable time" are challenging words to people who are alternately focused on the past or future.

The past year has proven to be a very different year than we've experienced before. It was easy for us to go back, to look at what the year 2019 held and how much differently we lived day to day. We lamented about the good old days of just one year before. We wanted things to be back to normal. We talked about what normal was and how we felt stressed and confused. Then, too, we simultaneously looked to the future. We hoped, prayed and trusted that COVID 19 would be short-lived and that a vaccine would be readily available. We looked forward to hugging our family and friends, worshipping

together, travelling, and so much more. It was very difficult day after day to live in the present, to live in the moment. It remains so. We still lament what was and focus on what will be in the future that is anything but absolutely predictable at this moment.

We continue to talk with others about what was and hopefully what will be. It remains difficult many days to live in the moment, to not be sidetracked by living in the past or the future. Living in the moment, moment by moment day in and day out is something we are not accustomed to and we feel stressed and unsure as never before.

Our calendars remain nearly empty compared to 2019 and very early 2020. In one respect we have little to do but live in the moment. Yet, that can be illusive.

This new season of Lent, beginning today, urges us, calls us to live in the present moment, where our sinfulness meets God's grace in the cross of Christ - grace assured, with no fear of our past and no worry about our future.

The truth that defines how we live the gift of faith is that we must live it now, in the present, before our earthly dust puts on eternal life. There truly is no time like now to explore who we are, marked by the cross of life.

You and I are invited into the disciplines of Lent today. Sharing with those in need, prayer, and fasting all function to attune our focus on the present moment.

A question for each of us this day is this - How will I make a difference in the life of someone in need now, without waiting another moment for a better time, a better plan, or a better situation?

A second question - How will I pause to pray, even now, even if I don't have the perfect words, the right devotional booklet, or sacred space?

A third question - how will I discipline myself toward basic needs and simplicity now, rather than gorge on comfort foods, buy stuff, and otherwise seek to fill and numb myself?

You see, this invitation by the gospel frees us from the never-ending and self-centering cycle of past and future by pushing us into the grace we know in this present time. Our disciplines help us to pause long enough to see that Christ has already brought us this far by grace and releases us from our future worries. You and I are free to rest and serve in the present moment until we are filled to overflowing with love and praise. Thanks be to God.

Amen

## Prayers of Intercession

*The prayers are prepared locally for each occasion. The following examples may be adapted or used as appropriate.*

Relying on the promises of God, we pray boldly for the church, the world, and all in need.

*A brief silence.*

O God, you call your church to be ministers of reconciliation throughout the world. Inspire your church in its proclamation of the gospel and guide its ministries to build up the body of Christ. Lord, in your mercy,  
**hear our prayer.**

O God, you created the earth and all its inhabitants and you declared that it is good. Protect mountains and valleys, animals and plants, and direct us to be good stewards of all you have made. Lord, in your mercy,  
**hear our prayer.**

O God, you desire peace. Direct governments and leaders to work for the well-being of all people and raise up advocates to speak and serve on behalf of the downtrodden. Lord, in your mercy,  
**hear our prayer.**

O God, you are our hope in the midst of despair, our help in the midst of sorrow, and our consolation in the midst of affliction. Grant comfort to all who suffer in body, mind, or spirit (*especially*) and support caregivers who attend to all in need. Lord, in your mercy,  
**hear our prayer.**

O God, you are love, and you call us to love one another. Accompany with your grace those journeying toward baptism and call us all to repentance as we prepare to celebrate Christ's death and resurrection. Lord, in your mercy,  
**hear our prayer.**

*Here other intercessions may be offered.*

O God, you are our life and our salvation. We give you thanks for the righteous who have died in faith. Inspire us by their example to proclaim your steadfast love. Lord, in your mercy,  
**hear our prayer.**

We entrust ourselves and all our prayers to you, O faithful God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**