

Ash Wednesday
5 March, Anno Domini 2025
Joel 2:12-19

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

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

“Where are you, Adam? I know longer know your way because you no longer walk in My way. You have departed from Me and wandered into deserted wastelands inhabited by demons and chasing after mirages, delusions that would seem to offer refreshment and rest. But their promises vanish and all that you find is emptiness and sorrow and a bruised conscience. You have snuck away to dark corners to indulge your flesh. You have turned away and grumbled and slandered under your breath. You have fled and hidden rather than be reconciled to your Christian family. You have traveled far and wide chasing worldly pleasures and activities at the expense of hearing and reading and studying My Word. You have skipped down the broad, easy, and pleasing path that leads away from My kingdom. You walk in a way that is not good. It is a way that will only lead to eternal death. Where are you, O man? Because you are not with Me.”

Do you hear the voice of your Lord? Do you hear His warning? Do you hear His earnest pleading for you to turn back, to turn away from the foolishness of your own wisdom, the desires of your flesh, and your empty excuses for why you have not walked with Him? Do you hear the voice of the living Christ calling into the deep dark of your grave calling you out of death into the way of life?

Perhaps you feel as though the opportunity for repentance has passed. Perhaps you believe that you are too far gone, too far down the road of sin and damnation. Perhaps you imagine that the invitation no longer applies to you and that an eternity under the burning hot wrath of God is all that is left for you.

Hear again the word of the Lord. “Yet, EVEN NOW, return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” It is not too late. So long as you are alive and our Lord has not yet returned in glory, God tenderly invites each and every one of you to turn back to Him in humble repentance, as you bear the ashes of repentance and mourning, reminding you of the death that hangs around your neck and the curse that it has brought with it, a curse that the Law shows and your conscience knows you

deserve. He invites you to lay your anger and bitterness aside, to cease your grumbling and discontent, to stop rushing headlong into the sin that is consuming you.

Joel uttered this call to repentance after the Lord had prophesied that a plague of locusts would swarm down on Judah and utterly ruin the land because they had made their bellies their god and were using the rich fruits of the land for their idolatry. Now, I've never been in the midst of a swarm of locusts but I've read that the swarms can swell into the billions and spread as wide as 40 miles. The sound is deafening and the sky is so thick with them that it truly does turn black like night. They consume everything in their path and leave desolation behind them.

That sounds like the perfect description of your sins, does it not? If you take the Law of God seriously, and you most certainly should, you know that your sins are like an innumerable swarm of locusts that have consumed you and left you stripped of all that is good and true and holy, fit now only for the wasting fires of God's eternal judgment. And if you imagine for even a moment that God will be fooled by your excuses, behold your forefathers in the wilderness who angered the Lord God with their relentless idolatry and grumbling. They fell in the wilderness and never entered the Promised Land. Consider your forefathers in Israel and Judah who rejected the Lord as their king, who married foreign spouses who led them into all manner of idolatry and wickedness, who rejected the prophetic warnings. God sent Assyria and Babylon to devastate them and carry them into captivity. Consider the scourge of materialism and secularism and transhumanism that is sweeping across the world emptying churches as the Word of God is replaced by man's so-called reason and the idol of science. The Word of God is being taken from such places leaving only emptiness and meaninglessness. God sees deep into your heart, deeper than even you want to look. He knows the dark fantasies, the bitter hatred, and the selfish greed that grip your flesh and are constantly looking for opportunities to indulge themselves. And He does not ignore them.

The day of the Lord is coming in which the thoughts and intentions of men's hearts will be revealed. That day will not be stopped and none can escape it. It is not simply true for those who believe it. The Son of Man will come with all His angels in His glory and there will be no place to hide. We will all stand before Him and give a full account of how we used the life, the time, the ability, and the resources He richly blessed us with. We will give an accounting of the vocations which the Lord has laid upon us, whether we spent our life in selfless living for the good of our neighbor, making known the riches of God's grace in Christ Jesus or in selfish living despising the things of God for the cheap thrills, pleasures, and treasures of

this world.

“If you, O Lord, should keep a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?” None. Not a single one of us. Before the clear eyes of God’s Holy Law we are lost. We are wretched sinners who deserve nothing but God’s temporal and eternal wrath. To stand before God on the basis of our own merits or to expect that God will make an exception for sin in our case is a fool’s errand and will end in the fires of hell because we sought refuge where there was none.

That is why we must give serious attention TODAY to the call of the Lord “Yet, even now, even as the the Last Day approaches, return to me with all your heart. Repent of all your sin and turn away from it. Purge from your heart, your home, your eyes, and your schedule every evil, everything that keeps you from My Word. It is death. It is put there by the devil for the sole purpose of keep you from Me.” The Lord is not speaking in hyperbole just to make a point. He is issuing a most serious warning about a day that will come upon us like a thief in the night. And if we are not prepared, if we are caught believing that we can wait until later, we will perish and there will never again be an opportunity for repentance.

But that opportunity remains to you right now, this very hour. For the Lord invites you again to return to Him, to turn away from everything the world offers you and tries to teach you about truth and righteousness. The world knows nothing of these things because it rejects the One who is truth and righteousness. It thinks its lusting and coveting and idolatry are righteousness. It imagines that adultery and murder and theft are love. It’s mouth is an open grave filled only with lies and death.

The Lord would not have any lost to it. He desires that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Whether you have lived under the delusion of your own righteousness or lived under the despair of your wickedness, the Lord God desires that ALL, that YOU, turn away from their sin and seek refuge in the Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, repenting of their sin and seeking His Word of absolution. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. That is why He cries out “Return. I am filled with mercy and compassion. I love to forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Though your sins are like scarlet, I have spilled the rich scarlet Blood of My Son to wash you clean and make you as white as snow. Only return to Me that I may make you righteous. Return with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind. Put away your sin. Let go of your idols. Return with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. Rend your hearts wide open, hide nothing, that I may mend them. Spare your clothes but spare nothing of your heart. Return to Me and I will pour out my mercy and my blessing upon you and fill you

with the peace that passes all understanding.”

Over these next forty days of Lent we will focus our attention on returning to Lord - turning away from sin and turning toward God. God grant that His Word upon which we meditate together would turn our hearts toward Him who has provided the Lamb of salvation because He is truly gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And to all who return to Him, to all who have taken shelter in the wings of His mercy, the Lord has promised that the day of His return will be a day filled with great joy and rejoicing as we join the countless hosts in His eternal kingdom.

God grant each of us true repentance and the joy of His forgiveness.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.