

Rev. Lynne Ogren Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
February 26, 2020 Ash Wednesday
Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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

It is good to be together when we remember our humanity and look to God for forgiveness and grace. This isn't an easy service. Next to Good Friday when we retell Jesus' journey to the cross, this is a difficult time to come before God and face who we really are. And perhaps it's helpful to know that we are not alone in our faults and failings.

Ash Wednesday worship requires a willingness to be honest with ourselves about our human condition. In a little while we will confess, more specifically than usual, the wrongs we have done and the good we fail to do.

I have never been a very good confessor, especially when I have wronged someone else. It is hard to say we are sorry—to admit that we've blown it, to face the possibility of rejection or anger from the one we have offended.

Is it even harder to do that before God? We don't have to look God in the eye, but in the reading from Isaiah, God forces us to do that.

The people of Israel are returning to their homeland after they have been in exile for about a generation. They had been taken away by another nation because of their unfaithfulness to God. God had refused to save them because they kept turning to other idols—some from other nations and sometimes trusting in themselves rather than looking to God for their life and safety.

Now as they return to their homeland, they think they need to make grand gestures so that God will love them again. Like their ancestors they humbled themselves by fasting. They gave up their nice clothing and wore rags and covered themselves with ashes. They likely fasted from eating, as well. But God is not impressed by these public displays.

The truth is, God never stopped loving His people. God tells them to fast, or give some things up, differently. They are to fast from the ways they have contributed toward the trouble and pain in the world. Tonight these words are for us, too.

As we begin this Lenten season, we are called to look God in the eye by looking into the eyes of those who suffer because of our sin, our privileged positions, or our prejudices.

Tonight, we will confess our pride, envy, and self-indulgence. We will confess our false judgements and the ways we neglect to address the suffering in the world around us.

It is not pleasant, and even downright uncomfortable, to admit these things about ourselves. But our wounded hearts cannot heal without exposing the sin that infects us.

The good news is that God does not leave us there. God calls us to look into the eyes of the suffering and brokenness we see in others because that is where God is found. And when we see—and respond—to these needs we are united with God in bringing healing and wholeness to the brokenhearted—including us.

None of us can solve the problems in the world on our own. But we can each participate in the ways God gifts us and guides us to do.

I read a story from a high school history teacher about an A+ student who wrote a message on the bottom of his test paper: "If you could, can you give my bonus points to whoever scores the lowest?"

The teacher wrote, "[This student] offered up what was rightfully his, his earning, to any peer that may have been struggling especially hard the day of the test...I honored their request. The recipient was very thankful. The 5 points actually moved [that student] from failing to passing."

Jesus teaches us to give without seeking acknowledgement, to pray earnestly without showing off, and to fast from the things that inhibit us from following God's path for us.

These disciplines of Lent, done with a humble heart, help us to look into the eyes of God by looking into the reality of others and risk being changed into God's agents of love and grace.

Let us come before our loving God today, trusting in God's abundant mercy and faithfulness promised and granted to us in Holy Baptism.

Thanks be to God. Amen