

Ash Wednesday

March 5, 2025



For if the touch of Christ was healing, how much more does that most tender spiritual touch, nay, absorption of the Word, communicate to the soul all that belongs to the Word.

—Martin Luther—

Concerning Christian Liberty

(Internet Modern History Sourcebook)

PROCLAMATION POINTS

The following are some thoughts and questions to be used for a text study on the weekly lessons, or for jump-starting the imagination of the preacher and hearer in preparing for the proclamation event.

Joel 2:12-19

The Hebrew custom of tearing one's garment as a sign of grief or repentance is first mentioned in Genesis 37:29, when Reuben found the empty pit where he urged his scheming brothers to put Joseph instead of killing him. (His intention was to come back later and free his younger brother.) When he found Joseph gone from the underground holding cell, Reuben tore his clothes in despair.

The Word of the Lord spoken through Joel is a call to tear one's heart as a sign of repentance rather than tearing one's garment. A broken and contrite heart is the sign of grief for our sin and idolatry. Spiritual brokenness is an admission of guilt and shame in the face of the loving and patient God of Israel. To know and acknowledge sin is to be open to grace.

- *How do you know if a person is truly sorry for their sins? Can you see it in the way they dress or the way they look? How does God know if we are truly repentant of our sin and disobedience?*

The assurance given in this passage comes from God's character and willingness to relent from punishment. God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster." (Joel 2:13) When God relents, he leaves a blessing for his people.

- *How is our assurance founded in God's loving and forgiving nature, rather than in our ability to properly repent and show our sorrow to him?*
- *In what way is gathering for corporate worship an expression of our repentance? In what sense is forgiveness not just a "private" matter? Where do we gather to hear God's spoken word of forgiveness?*

Psalms 51:1-13 (14-19)

In this psalm where David confessed adultery with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, the Hebrew word used for "transgression" is *pe-sah*. It is more than just a generic word for sin; it is akin to purposeful rebellion, or even a criminal act. Certainly David's lust and power-mongering was a crime against Uriah and Bathsheba, and yet this crime, as David confessed, was a crime against God. His disobedience and betrayal were ultimately a rejection of God's will for his life. David confessed that his sin (*ha-tah*) was ever before him. He was aware of his sin and knelt before God for forgiveness.

- *How would you describe the difference between a "sin" and a "crime" in everyday terminology?*
- *In what way(s) is all human sin a crime against God? How is sin a denial of God's sovereignty over our lives?*

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

In Greek mythology, the prophetess Cassandra was one who had the power to foresee the future, but she was under the curse that no one would ever believe her. It is difficult to watch those we love fall into error when we know that they will be harmed in some way by their actions. We want to spare them the trial of figuring it out the hard way.

- *Have you ever felt the emotional angst of urging someone you love to listen to a warning, but they ignore you?*

In this Scripture text, Paul's message of reconciliation in Christ was so important that he "begged" the Corinthians to listen to him. "We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20).

- *In our modern lives of faith, do we see the human need for reconciliation with God as something urgent? Why do many people seem so disinterested in the message of Christ?*

Paul went on to say that it was for our sake that Jesus — who knew no sin, who was perfect in character, purity, and holiness — became sin for us. God did this gracious act so that we might become the righteousness of God. Jesus takes upon himself our sin, and gives us his righteousness in exchange. God's love for us cleanses us from sin!

- *In what ways do our attempts to make ourselves righteous always fail? How does the saving work of Christ not only take away our sins, but also put an end to our human attempts to justify ourselves?*

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Jesus warned his followers that practicing their "righteousness" (*di-kai-o-soo-nay*) could be spiritually dangerous. If our only motivation for giving, serving, and tending to those in need, is to receive praise from others, then we are not doing those things for the right reasons.

- *Why is it such a human temptation to announce our good works to others? Remembering what Paul said about the source of our righteousness being in Christ alone, why would a person of faith need to seek their own glory or credit?*

Jesus taught that we should lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven, rather than treasures on earth, "for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (v. 21).

- *In what sense is God himself our treasure in heaven? What assurance does it give us in the here and now to know that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"? (Romans 8:39)*