

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church  
605 Madison St., Marshall, WI  
February 26 2020 + Ash Wednesday  
Joel 2, Psalm 51, Matthew 6 + Pastor Nancy M. Raabe**

We are taught to think of Ash Wednesday as day for individual penance. But as the first day of our 40-day journey (minus Sundays) through Lent, it is really about community.

At first it doesn't seem as if get that message from our Gospel reading. Here, Jesus is teaching the disciples not to go about boasting of their piety as the Jewish temple leaders were accustomed to doing, showing off with their long robes and loud prayer. Instead of glorying in wealth and status, invest your heart, soul and mind into building up the treasure of your relationship with God, which no earthly force can destroy.

This does connect when we think of Ash Wednesday as the beginning of our journey of back into right relationship with God so that we may live, work, worship, and pray in the fullness of who God created us to be.

We spent time this evening with Psalm 51 because I'd like to invite you to adopt it as a daily roadmap for these 40 days. God knows everything about us, all our stumblings and failings and fears. But we must be honest with God about ourselves, and Psalm 51 takes us there: Even as we admit that our sin is part of who we are, even before birth, we acknowledge that God cherishes us deeply. This enables us to get on

our knees and pray: “Let me hear joy and gladness, that the body you have broken may rejoice.”

The truth is that we are all broken, no matter how put-together we might at times be tempted to think we are. Acknowledging our brokenness brings grief, for the wrongs we have done and hurts we have caused. As we know from the Old Testament, the ancient Jewish custom of repentance and mourning often included the putting on of ashes and sackcloth. In the early Christian church, ashes came to be used for public penance. On the first day of Lent, Christians who had been excommunicated for serious sins, and who wanted to be restored into the church, would stand at the church doors dressed in sackcloth. The doors were opened and they were sprinkled with ashes as penitential psalms were sung. The doors were then shut and the repentant sinners kept isolated until they were welcomed back on Maundy Thursday. Down through the centuries, Lent thus became an intense time for all sinners to practice repentance.

The ashes we will receive are a solemn reminder of human mortality and our need for reconciliation with God. They also point toward everything in our life that threatens to turn us to dust—our inflated opinion of ourselves that is shattered when we fall off our high horse as we always will at some point; the bad choices we make that we later try to deny or rationalize; the worldly treasures we have stored up in barns that will inevitably be consumed by moth and rust.

And then we lift our arms to God and sing, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation!” we know that it has already been accomplished. “See,” as Paul writes, “now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!”

And what do we do with this joy? “Blow the trumpet!” Joel says. “Shout out! Do not hold back! Lift up your voice!” Isaiah says elsewhere. The penance that God desires of us is not to hang our heads in sackcloth and ashes, but, in Isaiah’s words, “to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry.”

All of our readings today address communal reconciliation. What kind of community does God want us to be? One that is closed up tight in fear, or one that is open to being transformed by a human encounter with the living Christ in the face of a stranger?

Throughout Lent we will sing Joel 2:13 as our Gospel Acclamation: “Return to the Lord your God, who is gracious and merciful....” Yet, this turning, this returning, is not ours to accomplish – it is God’s work. So we enter Lent together with the sign of humility drawn on our foreheads, to lead us into the renewal of our commitment to love God and follow Christ. This is the same sign that was traced in the same place at our baptism to tell of rebirth. Let our 40-day restoration not be one long Good Friday, but a springtime journey along the life of faith. Amen.