



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott Schul

Ash Wednesday March 6, 2019

Sermon Title: "Seeing Through an Ashen Cross"

Gospel Text: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

If we took a poll, what season of the church year do you think would come out as the least popular? If I had to guess, I'd say the season of Lent would win that dubious honor. And if in that same poll we asked folks to list their least favorite church festival, which one do you think would top the list? I think I'd place my bet on Ash Wednesday.

Why is there so much discomfort with Lent and Ash Wednesday? Maybe part of it is that we're afraid to make a big show of our piety, especially after hearing something like our Gospel lesson from Matthew, in which Jesus warns his listeners not to seek attention through their faith practices and instead pray and fast in secret. But I really don't think any of us have come here for this service because we think it will prove how holy and righteous we all are.

Instead, I think that Lent in general and Ash Wednesday in particular make us uncomfortable because they are so brutally honest. They function like a mirror which truthfully reveals every blemish, every wrinkle and every gray hair. They strip away the many masks we wear, and leave us standing in the bright white light of God, fully unwrapped, fully vulnerable and fully exposed. And in that bright light, we are reminded of two critically important but very uncomfortable things: (1) we are sinners; and (2) we are going to die... "dust-to-dust" as the saying goes.

But if this night makes us squeamish because it causes us to see ourselves more *realistically*, it also offers invaluable comfort because it enables us to see God more *fully*. In fact, Ash Wednesday has the potential to frame the way we view the *entire* Lenten season and maybe even the way we see life itself... because on this night... *we see through an ashen cross*.

Much of Ash Wednesday is built around that great Psalm of repentance, Psalm 51. Tradition has it that David offered Psalm 51 to God in sorrow for David's great sin involving Bathsheba. Our sins are perhaps less public than David's, but no less significant. To a certain extent, *we too* have embraced evil. *We too* have been selfish. *We too* have been self-centered. *We too* have pursued false gods. At times we've even constructed and manipulated our world in order to exalt ourselves as a god. In all of this, we've attempted to deceive God about our true intentions. We've attempted to deceive those around us as to who and what we are. And most dangerously, we have deceived ourselves.

But seeing through an ashen cross wipes away the deception. Seeing through an ashen cross reveals our disease and the extent to which it afflicts, affects, and corrupts us. Seeing through an ashen cross exposes us... as the sinners we really are.

If our vision extended only this far, we would be broken, dejected, despondent, and hopeless, shattered and imprisoned by an unrelenting sense of worthlessness.

But seeing through an ashen cross allows us to see *beyond* ourselves. After all, it's not merely a smudge of ash that we receive upon our foreheads. Those ashes are in the form of Christ's cross, and in that cross we see not just our disease but also the blessed cure for all that torments us, troubles us, and weighs us down. In this evening's Old Testament reading the prophet Joel provided us with beautiful words that describe this cure: "Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding with steadfast love."

Seeing through an ashen cross allows us to cut through the fog of sin and despair that surrounds us so that in the distance we can see our Savior Jesus Christ, shining like a lighthouse on a choppy ocean, lovingly beckoning us to come closer, encouraging us to leave at the foot of his cross all of our burdens, our mistakes, our fears, our anxieties, our insecurities, our anger, our selfishness, and our sin. And in return he offers us the soothing balm of healing, forgiveness, and restoration.

As Paul reminded us in our Second Reading tonight, Christ took on our sin so that through him we could become the righteousness of God. Washed clean by Christ, we can shine with his brightness. Armed with this promise and uplifted by this hope, we can move beyond our pain into new life...all because we are blessed to see ourselves and our God through an ashen cross.

But of course God's grace doesn't stop there. The ashen cross is a reminder to us that God's transformative power not only heals what was broken, but empowers us to be the people God created us to be. God continues to form, conform, reform, and transform us so that God's dream for us can come true. In the liberation and freedom of God's forgiveness, our shackles drop to the ground so that we can joyfully enter into loving service of our neighbor. And in response to God's merciful deliverance, we are moved, like King David in Psalm 51, to ask God to loose our tongues and open our lips so that our mouths can shout our praise and sing aloud of our deliverance.

When you walked into this sanctuary this evening, Ash Wednesday might not have been at the top of your list of favorite church events. But I hope that has begun to change...because:

Tonight we're reminded that God loves us eternally.

Tonight we're reminded that though we may stray, we will never lose our true identity as God's beloved children.

Tonight we're reminded that God's love, not our mortal death, will hold the last and decisive word concerning our future.

Tonight we're reminded that God, like the prodigal father, races across time and eternity to embrace us, forgive us, and restore us.

Tonight we can begin to see ourselves, our God, and all of our tomorrows through new eyes...because

tonight we can finally see things clearly... because we are seeing through an ashen cross.

Amen.