

Ash Wednesday March 6, 2019

Year C – the Gospel of Luke

Lutheran

Living the ^ Lectionary

*A weekly study of the Scriptures for the coming Sunday since May 4, 2014.
An opportunity to make Sunday worship more meaningful and to make the rhythms of the readings part of the rhythms of your life.*

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<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/15340/an-examen-for-ash-wednesday>

Hymn of the Day

Lutheran Service Book (LSB) 607 The Lutheran Hymnal (TLH) 329

“From depths of woe I cry to Thee”

“Martin Luther’s hymns were vitally important to the Reformation. They presented the gospel in beautiful, memorable ways that people could understand in their own language.

One of Luther’s earliest compositions was “From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee,” a paraphrase of Psalm 130 (*Aus tiefer Not schrei’ ich zu dir*, LSB 607). He wrote this hymn in 1523, around the time that he was revising the Latin Mass. Near the end of the year Luther wrote a letter to George Spalatin, the court chaplain to Elector Frederick the Wise and encouraged Spalatin to compose German hymns based on the Psalms. He enclosed “From Depths of Woe” as an example. Little did Luther know that a few short years later in 1525 that same hymn would be sung at Elector Frederick’s funeral. It was also sung at the funeral of Frederick’s successor, Elector John the Steadfast, in 1532...”

- <https://lutheranreformation.org/theology/depths-woe-cry-thee/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctBQw5vOYuw> “Martin Luther: Hymns, Ballads, Chants, Truth” Concordia Publishing House
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xe3hybFCY0> “Hymns for All Saints: Lent, Easter, Pentecost” Concordia Publishing House
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppM3GU4O4vQ> A variation, also based on Psalm 130 Christopher Miner Melody recorded live at Grace Bible Church - Killeen, TX

Commentaries have been chosen because the author has written in a way that compliments the reading. Not all of the commentaries are from Lutheran sources. They have been edited for length and in some cases for additional content that is not in keeping with a Lutheran understanding of Scripture. Links are provided for those who wish to read the entire commentary.

The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001
by [Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.](#)

Joel 2:12-19; Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), the same reading or Isaiah 58:1-12

“We know nothing about the prophet “Joel, son of Pethuel,” aside from what we can glean from the writings that appear in his book...It is not certain exactly when the prophet lived... Even the historical crisis that occasioned Joel's prophetic messages is obscure. The prophet describes the land as falling under the shadow of an invasion of a “locust” army (1:4), which devastated Judah's crops, leaving land, animals, and populace groaning in travail...

Whichever view one takes regarding the historical occasion for the book, the theological theme is clear. The prophet announced that the crisis of locust was no mere accident, but the hand of God...

The Book of Joel can be divided neatly into two parts. In 1:1-2:17, the crisis is described as God's judgment and the people are called upon to repent. The pericope for Ash Wednesday falls at the end of this section. The rest of the book contains the prophet's announcement of the advent of the Lord's mercy in new and surprising ways...” (continued after the reading)

Return to the LORD

¹²“Yet even now,” declares the LORD,
“return to me with all your heart,

with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
¹³ and rend your hearts and not your garments.”

Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster.

¹⁴ Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for the LORD your God?

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion;
consecrate a fast;

call a solemn assembly;

¹⁶ gather the people.

Consecrate the congregation;

assemble the elders;

gather the children,

even nursing infants.

Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her chamber.

¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep
and say, “Spare your people, O LORD,
and make not your heritage a reproach,
a byword among the nations.^[a]

Why should they say among the peoples,
‘Where is their God?’”

The LORD Had Pity

¹⁸ Then the LORD became jealous for his land
and had pity on his people.

¹⁹ The LORD answered and said to his people,

“Behold, I am sending to you
grain, wine, and oil,
and you will be satisfied;
and I will no more make you
a reproach among the nations.

a. [Joel 2:17](#) Or *reproach, that the nations should rule over them*

“...Unlike the prophets Amos, Micah, or Isaiah, Joel did not emphasize repentance as turning away from evil and toward a life of justice. Rather, Joel emphasized repentance as turning to the Lord in worship: "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn

assembly" (2:15). Joel does not focus on justice, name specific sins, or single out specific people or castes of people for their sins. Rather, Joel bids the people to turn toward God in repentance and worship.

Similar to Amos (cf. Amos 5:18-20), Joel used the term "day of the Lord" not to refer to the end of time, but to the time when God would act within history. The term "day of the Lord" probably began as a reference to Israel's major religious festival, the festival of Tabernacles - "the day of the festival of the Lord" (Hosea 9:5)...

Joel's cry to "blow the trumpet in Zion, sound the alarm on my holy mountain" is the announcement that the day of the Lord "is coming, it is near" (2:1). And like the Amos, Joel was announcing that the Lord's coming was not the good news the people had expected, but bad news...).

And then comes the surprise in Joel's message - at least when compared to Amos 5, Micah 6, or Isaiah 2. The prophet calls on the people to a worship service of repentance: "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning" (2:12)... Joel believes, and so Joel proclaims: God's character is "faithful" (perhaps a better translation in this context of the Hebrew *hesed* than "steadfast love"). And because God's character is to be faithful, the horizon, dark and gloomy with storm clouds of judgment as night falls, can now shine crisp and clear with the Lord's favor, when morning dawns."

➤ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=256 **Rolf Jacobson** Professor of Old Testament and Alvin N. Rogness Chair in Scripture, Theology, and Ministry, Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minn [This link also contains connections to 9 additional commentaries.](#)

Psalm 51:1-13 (14-19); RCL. Psalm 51:1-17

"Our brothers and sisters in the faith before us have provided two important keys for unlocking this psalm.

First, there is the heading that says, "A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone in to Bathsheba." Supplied by the editors of the Book of Psalms, these headings often point the way to interpreting and applying the psalm. In this case, the heading is saying, "Imagine this as the sort of prayer that David prayed after being convicted of his sins by the prophet Nathan" (2 Samuel 11 and 12)..." (continued after the reading)

Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

51 Have mercy on me,^[a] O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

- ³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
- ⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight, [Cited Rom. 3:4](#)
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.
- ⁵ Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
- ⁶ Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.
- ⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.
- ⁹ Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
- ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right^[b] spirit within me.
- ¹¹ Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
- ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.
- ¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
- ¹⁴ *Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.*
- ¹⁵ *O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.*
- ¹⁶ *For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.*
- ¹⁷ *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*
- ¹⁸ *Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
build up the walls of Jerusalem;*
- ¹⁹ *then will you delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.*
- a. [Psalm 51:1](#) Or *Be gracious to me*
b. [Psalm 51:10](#) Or *steadfast*

“...In verses 1 -- 5, the psalm begins with a cry for forgiveness, emphasizing the urgency of the situation with a series of imperative verbs: have mercy, blot out, wash, and cleanse. The picture behind the Hebrew word translated "transgressions" in verses 1, 3, and 13, is one of rebellion, as when children rebel against parents (see also Isaiah 1:2). The literal sense of the Hebrew translated "iniquity" (verses 2, 9) is "to be bent out of shape." For example, in Psalm 38:6, the Jewish Publication Society Bible gives the translation "I am all bent." The word translated "sin" (Hebrew hata' in verses 2, 3, 4, 9) or "sinner" (5 and 13) in non-theological contexts means "to miss the target." Judges 20:16 tells of 700 left-handed sling-shotters who could "sling a stone at a hair and not miss (hata')."

Balancing these words for sin are three Hebrew picture-words for forgiveness. The Hebrew translated "blot out" in verse 1 is also used to "wipe" a dirty dish (2 Kings 21:13). To "wash" in verses 2 and 7 could better be translated "scrub," as one scrubs dirty clothes (Exodus 19:10, 14). "Cleanse" in verse 2 and "be clean" in verse 7 is the same word used for washing clothes in a river (Leviticus 13:6, 34, 58).

Verses 6 -- 12 offer another request for forgiveness. The verb "create" (verse 10) in the Hebrew Bible always has God as its subject, and the result of the activity is always something entirely new (see Genesis 1, for example). The psalmist is praying for a brand new beginning, a fresh start, a new, clean spirit.

In verses 13 -- 17, the one praying looks forward to being happy and right with God once again (verses 8, 11-12). Once he/she experiences the joy of being forgiven, he/she vows to witness and teach others about it and sing and praise God (verses 13-15). In verses 16 and 17 the psalmist says, "The sort of sacrifice the Lord desires is not something I bring as an offering. Rather, the Lord wants me, broken spirit, broken heart and all" (see also Micah 6:6-8)...

Thus Psalm 51 is a prayer for individuals in distress, but it is also a prayer for the community on Ash Wednesday and for the worship of God's People each week."

- https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=478
James Limburg Professor Emeritus of Old Testament, Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minn.

2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10; RCL, the same reading

"A reliable study bible will provide the preacher with the necessary introductory material to be aware of the complications surrounding the interpretation of this letter

The verses designated for the beginning of the season of Lent conclude a long section in the letter concerning Paul's ministry (2:14-6:10). Paul's definitions and descriptions of his ministry, however, are not entirely in defense of his apostleship. Rather, they are for the sake of deepening his relationship with the Corinthians and for the sake of the Gospel. The section can be divided into three parts that each seem to revolve around one grounding theme. After an introduction (2:14-17), 3:1-4:6 situates the concept of ministry through the image of the new covenant. The next section (4:7-5:10) discusses the realities of ministry set within the context of trials, affliction, and suffering. In the final segment of this part of the letter (5:11-6:10), Paul casts his ministry within the creative and life-giving concept of reconciliation..."

- http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=244
Karoline Lewis, Associate Professor of Preaching and the Marbury E. Anderson Chair in Biblical Preaching, Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minn.

The Ministry of Reconciliation...

²⁰ *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.* We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

⁶ Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² For he says,

“In a favorable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” [Cited from Isa. 49:8](#)

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. ³ We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

“...Paul has written of a “new creation” ([5:17](#)), probably meaning a *new standard of evaluation* set by Christ. He and his coworkers, Timothy and Apollos, are “ambassadors for Christ” ([5:20a](#)) urging (not compelling) the Christians at Corinth to seek for oneness with God. While Christ was sin-less, he did bear our sins, becoming our mediator with God ([5:21](#)). May the readers of this letter follow the ambassadors’ example, accepting God’s love productively rather than “in vain” ([6:1](#)). “Have” in [6:2](#) is prophetic, so by roughly quoting Isaiah [49:8](#), Paul tells the Corinthians that now is the time when God gives grace (undeserved love) to us; now we are being restored to union with God.

Paul and his coworkers, (“servants of God”, [6:4](#)), are aiding “in every way” they can. They have shown themselves true agents of God in enduring physical and mental pressures (“afflictions”, [6:4-5](#)) and “hardships” – unlike Paul’s critics – by using what the Spirit has given them (vv. [6](#), [7a](#) and Galatians [5:22-23](#)) including the whole offensive (“right hand”, [6:7](#)) and defensive (“left”) arsenal that God provides, whether honoured or discredited (by their critics, who even call them “impostors”, [6:8](#), i.e. not true to God.) Seen as insignificant (as bad teachers), they are valued by true Christians, “dying” ([6:9](#)) to self-centeredness but alive in following Christ; “sorrowful” ([6:10](#)) that the Corinthian Christians feel hurt that he refused their aid (he did not need it), yet “rejoicing” that they are faithful; living in poverty, yet “making many rich” spiritually and “possessing everything” that matters...”

- <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/zashwm.shtml> Comments have been prepared by Chris Haslam using reputable commentaries, and

checked for accuracy by the Venerable Alan T Perry, of the Anglican Diocese of Edmonton.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; RCL, the same reading

“There is perhaps no worship occasion in the Christian calendar where the ritual practice and the appointed Scriptures seem to clash more profoundly than Ash Wednesday.

After all, no sooner do we finish hearing Jesus tell his disciples that when they fast they should not only avoid marking their faces but actually clean them then we walk forward to have our faces disfigured with the mark of the cross traced in ash across our foreheads...”(continued after the reading)

“The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the 6th Chapter”

Giving to the Needy

6 “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

2 “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

The Lord's Prayer

5 “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 6 But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you...”

(continues with the Lord's Prayer)

Fasting

16 “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Lay Up Treasures in Heaven

19 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust^a destroy and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...”

- a. [Matthew 6:19](#) Or worm; also verse [20](#)

“This is the Gospel of the Lord” “Praise to You, O Christ”

Three Activities, One Goal

So what's going on? Is Jesus' condemning the very actions we engage in on Ash Wednesday? Actually, no. In fact, we miss the force of Jesus' comments all together if we think they are aimed at these spiritual practices. Rather, Jesus is speaking of the disposition of the heart and, in particular, the goal or, as Jesus says, the "reward" the practitioner seeks.

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes up three of the most important religious practices in the Judaism of his day: **giving alms** (contributions to those in need), **prayer**, and **fasting**. In each case, Jesus begins his comments with the formula of "whenever you..." as an introduction to instructions of both what not to do and what to do. (The lectionary in this case helpfully leaves aside the Lord's Prayer so that we may focus on what originally was most likely a trio of sayings.)

In each case, it is not the practice itself that is critiqued, but rather the goal of the practitioner to be noticed by his or her peers. This desire to be seen, to receive the approbation and affirmation of those nearby, is what defiles an otherwise holy act. Thus, the contrast is between performing the action in a way that draws attention from ones peers rather than in a way that honors God and seeks only God's approval. In each case, therefore, Jesus asserts that when you give alms, pray, or fast with the goal of gaining the attention or approval of one's peers, that attention is your reward...and all of your reward. There is, in other words, no spiritual value to the practice, as it only feeds one's desire and need to "be seen" by one's neighbors. Such practices should, in contrast, flow from a devotion to God that is expressed by caring for neighbor, praying, and disciplining ourselves with fasting. When this happens, we are *seen* by God and in this way rewarded...

At the center of this passage, then, is a promise: God sees us. God notices us. God accords us divine attention and pronounces us worthy of God's care and concern. Rooted in the authentic assurance our relationship with God gives us, we can therefore engage in spiritual practices whole-heartedly, not hoping to achieve the approval of others or even of God, but confident that God's approval has already been given. More than that, we can offer our lives as testimony to the One who accords us worth and dignity in the first place, as Jesus instructed just verses earlier: "Let your light so shine before others that they see your good works and glorify your father in heaven" (5:16).

Can the ashes imposed at the beginning of Lent be twisted into public displays of piety in an attempt to be noticed and admired by others? Certainly, as little that we do cannot be. But keep in mind that they were never intended as marks of piety. Rather, they are reminders of our mortality, as when the cross is traced in ash across our foreheads we simultaneously hear the words, "From dust you came; to dust you shall return." Faced with the stark reminder of both our mortality and our absolute dependence on God's mercy and grace, we may actually be better prepared to hear again and believe Jesus' promise that God, who created light from darkness and gives life to the dead, sees us...and loves us to the end."

- https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=901 **David Lose** Senior Pastor, Mount Olivet Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, Minn.



<https://www.catholicvirginian.org/?p=9386>

Considering the Imposition of Ashes for Ash Wednesday

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

For nearly a thousand years, these words have been spoken to young and old alike as the sign of the cross is traced on their foreheads with ashes—the Imposition of Ashes, as it has come to be known. During the last half of the 20th century, Lutherans have also begun to make use of this ancient rite, and indeed, it has been approved for use in the forthcoming *Lutheran Service Book*. And so, as our catechism is prone to ask: “What does this mean?” Where did this rite come from, and how can it be used meaningfully in LCMS congregations today?

Ashes in the Bible The Bible contains a number of references to ashes and dust (cf. Josh. 7:6; 1 Sam. 4:12; 2 Sam. 1:2, 15:32; Job 2:12, 16:15; Jer. 25:34; Lam. 2:10; Ezek. 27:30; Jonah 3:6). In fact, the Lord's curse on Adam, “*dust you are, and to dust you shall return*” (Gen. 3:19) is echoed in the Imposition of Ashes formula. In the New Testament, Jesus declares: “*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes*” (Matt. 11:21). Thus, in the Bible, ashes carry a two-fold meaning: as a sign of human mortality (Gen. 3:19) and as a sign of public repentance (Matt. 11:21).

Ashes in Church History This understanding carried over into the early and medieval church. Tertullian (ca. 160-225) describes the use of sackcloth and ashes in the penance of an adulterer before his pastor. Originally, ashes were reserved only for public penitents—i.e., murderers, adulterers and others who had fallen away from the church because of grave public sin but desired reconciliation. Such reconciliation could occur at a variety of times during the year, but by the medieval period, the beginning of Lent became a primary season of the church year for that reconciliation to take place.

By the 12th century, ashes became specifically associated with the beginning of Lent, thus providing the first day of Lent with its name, Ash Wednesday. However, by this time, everybody—pastors and people alike—had ashes either sprinkled on their head or traced on their foreheads in the sign of the cross. By the time of the Reformation, the imposition of ashes was a regular mainstay of Lenten piety and practice.

However, Lutherans at the time of the Reformation did not choose to retain the Imposition of Ashes. The reasons for this are not entirely clear since there is very little written for or against this practice by Luther and his colleagues. Thus, although Lutherans began Lent with Ash Wednesday, they did not retain the use of ashes as part of their Ash Wednesday order of service...”

➤ <https://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=1694>