

Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2021

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Return

Joel 2:12–19

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

Eph 1:2

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 (v 13).

Ash Wednesday and all of Lent can be summed up in one word: Return.

Return to the Lord your God.

Every Ash Wednesday, every Lent, we hear this call to return.

This season doesn't begin with God rebuking us.

It doesn't start with God denouncing us.

Instead, He pleads with us to come back.

He invites us into the sheepfold again.

Return.

Where have we been that we need to return?

Where have we wandered and gone astray?

Where have we gotten lost or trapped?

What ruts are we stuck in?

In heart and mind, we are often far away — far away from the Lord our God.

Off in our own fears and nightmares.

Off in our own dreams and fantasies.

Off in our own preoccupations and plans.

How do we know where we've been?

We need only look at how we've used our time, our treasures, and our talents.

They'll tell us a lot.

Your credit card statement will tell you where you've been.

Your browser history, timeline, and list of shows you've binge watched will tell you.

Your spouse, children, and friends will tell you.

And if they don't know where you've been, then they know where you haven't been.

Return.

First off, before anything else, return to the Lord your God.

Because only when you return to the Lord will you really be able
to return to your home, your work, and your serving fully and freely.

Return.

It's just that simple.

Surprisingly, God doesn't put conditions on it.

He doesn't say,

“Return when you've got your act together” or

“Return when you've stopped being stupid and sinning” or

“Return when you're truly, fully, perfectly repentant” or

“Return when you've made it all right.”

Just return, as you are now. Not next week. Not tomorrow. Today.

He doesn't call righteous people to return.

He calls us sinners to return to Him.

And there's no need to make a show for Him.

No need to pretend that you're better than you are. He knows.

No need to approach it like a job interview or a social media post.

Return with your sin and shame.

Return with your wounds and brokenness.

Return with your grief and sorrow.

Return with whatever loss and weariness you feel in your soul.

Bring all of it.

Bring it all to Him.

Because, **a broken and contrite spirit God will not despise** (Ps 51:17).

Because, **a bruised reed He will not break,**

and a faintly burning wick He will not quench (Isa 42:3).

Because, He has rest for those **who labor and are heavy laden** (Matt 11:28);

and your burdens will be lifted.

Return as you are, but take heart and listen to this promise:

He won't leave you as you are.

He won't leave you without forgiveness.

He won't leave you without grace and mercy.

He won't leave you without life and salvation.

**Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (v 13).**

So He shows you His grace.

He gives you His mercy.

He is slow to anger with you.

And He abounds in steadfast love toward you.

This is His nature: Our God is gracious, merciful, and forgiving.

And He has more life to give you than you've got death,
more forgiveness than you've got sin.

He never says, "What? You here *again* for forgiveness."

He throws His arms around you and welcomes you home.

So return. And receive.

Wherever we've been and whatever we've done,
we most certainly know where He's been.

He's been to the cross.

He didn't wander or get distracted or take a wrong turn.

He set His face and marched toward death.

The Shepherd dies for sheep that loved to wander.

The Master pays the debt His servants owe Him.

The sinless Son of God dies in sadness.

Yes, we are dying people living in the midst of dying people.

That's what the ashes confess.

Yet they come in the shape of a cross.

The cross means death for Him, life for you.

You are marked with the sign of the cross.

You belong to Him.

So the Good Shepherd calls us back.
We hear His voice, and we return.

Now let this whole season of Lent be for you a time of returning to Him
each and every day coming to Him,
for He delights to welcome you home.

Return.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ
Jesus.

Phil 4:7

Some ideas and phrases for this sermon are from "Ash Wednesday" in William Weedon, *Celebrating the Saints*, 256-257.