

Sermon for Ash
Wednesday,
February 26, 2020
by
Reverend Nathan
Erdman

[0:02] Well, our service this evening certainly is different. We have our entrance in silence; the hymns have a different tone.

Of course, there's the
ashes. And then there's
some of the words that
we have in our service
and our prayers and in
our scripture

readings—words like,

“wretchedness,”

“darkness,”

“wickedness,” “sin” ...

“death.” These are not

fun words!

[0:33] But this evening, you and I are called to reflect upon and consider words like these. I truly wish that it were not so, but

things like wickedness,
sin, and death are a part
of our world. Not only
that, sin and death are
not things just out there
in the world, but they

touch our very lives,
too. You and I—all of
us—we do things that
we are not proud of.
We do things that do
not honor the image of

God in us, and that fall short of God's vision for our lives; and death becomes part of our lives, too. There's the news that comes when

there's a catastrophe;
there's the loss of loved
ones; and finally,
barring Christ's return
in our lifetime, we will
die, too.

[1:32] What does God,
through the Church,
have to say to us on
Ash Wednesday about
where God is? And
what our call is, in the

midst of sin and death?
God's message, I
believe, calls out to us
today through the
Prophet Joel—Joel is a
prophet in Israel in the

5th century BC, so 400,
500 at the earliest. And
the people very much
know about sin and
death in their world and
in their lives. You see,

a swarm of locusts has
torn through the people
of Israel's fields—
utterly destroyed their
harvest and their crops.
This means starvation;

this means death. And not only that—the people have fallen in some way, away from God! It's not entirely clear how, from the

Book of Joel, exactly
what they did or what
they didn't do. But
usually, when a prophet
in the Old Testament
speaks of repentance,

that means the people
have either slipped into
idolatry, or they have
turned their back on the
poor—the widows, the

orphans, the stranger—
or maybe both.

[2:59] So Joel speaks
to a people who are
confronted squarely by

both sin and death.

And what does God say through his Prophet Joel? He says, “*Even now, return to me with all your heart!*” God

does not abandon his
people! He says,
“Even now! Even at
your lowest point!
Even when you are
feeling the most

guilty—or hopeless—
or afraid! *You can
come to me!* I am
calling *you*. *Return to
me with all your heart!*
You can do this!”

[3:47] Joel says, “Yes,
you can do this! Don’t
be afraid to return to
God—God is gracious!
God is merciful! God
is abounding, in

steadfast love that
cannot be moved!”

[4:05] Today—even
now—*you* can return to
God, too! With all

your heart! There are
no lost causes with
God. Perhaps you live
in the darkness now;
perhaps facing illness
or depression; or, just

plain, you don't like
where the world is
heading, and you are
afraid. God says in that
instance, "Turn to me!
Turn to me for the

strength for whatever
comes! I will be with
you every step of the
way!”

[4:38] Or, perhaps you haven't been the person that God calls you to be; perhaps there is something you have done that you just

cannot get past. Maybe you have really made a mess of things in your life—God calls to you, too, and God says, “Turn to me. *Turn to*

*me! Confess your sins,
and know the power of
fresh starts—know the
power of forgiveness!”*

[5:05] Tonight, on this
Ash Wednesday, return
to God and do so with
your whole heart. We
need God; *you* need
God; *I* need God! And

that's really what the
ashes are all about—
they remind us that we
need saving! You
know, many of us need
to remember that

sometimes, don't we?
How many times have
we heard someone say
(or have we said), "No,
no, I've got this, I've
got this ... I don't need

any help ... I've got it
all together!" You
know, and in the
western world of the
21st century, there is
more and more wealth;

more comfort; more security. And, if you are someone who has access to that, you can be convinced that you are invincible. But

make no mistake—we
need salvation and
forgiveness for our sins
and for all the ways we
have fallen short of
God's dream! And, we

need salvation from death—a salvation that only comes through Christ's death and resurrection.

[6:11] You know, the
night, this night,
tonight ... is the
beginning of our
journey towards Christ,
and his death and

resurrection that we
commemorate during
Holy Week and Easter.
And to really *live* into
that journey—to really
appreciate the greatness

of both Christ's
sacrifice and his life-
giving resurrection—
we need to prepare
now. Those ashes on
our forehead are a

commitment to this
season of preparation.

[6:41] *So, prepare
now!*

Give up those things

that separate you from
God; that distract you
from your life of faith.

Confess your sins to
God and seek
reconciliation with

those you have hurt.

And pray ... pray ...

pray!

Come to God in
prayer this Lent and
grow in your

relationship with him.
Ask God to empower
you to be a better
person—to be that
person that you want to
be.

[7:10] And you know,
Psalm 51, which we are
going to say later today
in our service, has such
moving and powerful
words for that,

“Create in me a clean
heart ...

“Give me the joy of
your saving help ...

“Deliver me from death
...”
...

[7:29] Sin and death
are real—but never
forget, so is God's
grace! So is God's
mercy! So is God's
forgiveness and so is

God's steadfast and
unflinching love!

God's power and love
are invincible—they
can change your life!

God is not done with

*you—God is not done
with this world!* So
even now, no matter
what you've done, or
what you've faced, or
what you've feared ...

*return to God! Return
to God with all your
heart!*

Amen!