



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094
(920)261-2570
A Stephen Ministry Congregation
www.goodshepherdwi.org

Ash Wednesday

February 14, 2018

“Sackcloth and Ashes to Robes of Righteousness”

(Joel 2:12-23)

Rev. David K. Groth

“‘Yet even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; 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” (Joel 2:12-23).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, You despise nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and contrite hearts that lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness we may receive from You full pardon and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

We do love our clothes, don't we? At the Johnson Creek Outlet Mall there's one clothing store after another offering a wide variety of styles and fashions: from jeans that have already gone through a shredder, to sequined formal wear. Can you imagine if there was only one clothing store across the country selling only one style of clothing intended for all people? It would incite armed rebellion. How would we strut our stuff? How would we survive without a way to express our individuality? How would we survive without our pretty coverings?

A more important question, however, what is it that we are covering up? The clothing may be attractive, but what lurks beneath? The easy answer is that we are covering our nakedness because that's what modest and proper people do, especially in Wisconsin, in February. But there's more to it than that. In the Scriptures, clothing is in reality also an attempt to cover over our shame.

Remember how Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit? Immediately they realized their nakedness. Suddenly, they know their sin, and because of that knowledge, they are ashamed. So, they sew together fig leaves to cover themselves in an attempt to cover over their shame and sin from one another and from the Lord. Of course, it doesn't work. The fig leaves don't cover up the real problem. They are wearing the wrong kind of garment.

Similarly, we wear beautiful clothing not just for the function of warmth, but also to hide our nakedness. Could it be we are also trying to deceive God, so we can stand before him and not be ashamed? Could it be we are also trying to cover over our sin? If that's the case, our clothing doesn't work any better than those cursed fig leaves. Our man-made garments are but filthy rags.

Remember our hearts are filled with sin: with evil thoughts, sexual desires, greed, jealousy, anger, envy, hatred, idolatry; need I go on? If the desires of your heart were laid bare for all Watertown to see, you would indeed be ashamed. But this is the condition of your heart . . . and of mine . . . and of every other human being in the world. This is the real person lurking beneath that we seek to hide, to cover with our man-made clothing. Obviously, we are not able to hide the truth from God. We may fool those around us, and we may be fooled by those around us, but the Lord God sees the condition of all hearts.

From dust we came, and to dust we shall return. Man is born into this world a sinner, and the wages of sin is death. Therefore our journey is back to the ground, back to dust. All our attempts to cover up our sin . . . every effort to pay up always results in the same destination: dust. We are dust, and to dust we shall return.

It is into such a sorry spiritual state of affairs that the prophet Joel speaks. The people of Israel have wandered away from their God. They have been unfaithful in word and deed. They have sought other gods and played the harlot. So the Lord will turn them over to disaster. They will be oppressed and downtrodden. They will suffer want and will weep in their distress. Thus, Joel calls out, "Rend your hearts and not your garments."

The ancient tradition was to express terrible anxiety and distress by tearing your garments, thereby revealing your state of sorrow. But Joel knows that the rending of garments will do nothing to fix a corrupt and

sinful heart. A torn garment **shows** the problem; a torn heart begins to **heal** the problem.

Rend your hearts and not your garments! Repent! Return to the Lord!

King David tells us in Psalm 51, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.”

Repent! Return to the Lord. Rend your hearts, for your sin separates you from your God. Sin is the dividing wall of hostility that destroys the relationship between God and man. Our sin has exiled us from the presence of the Lord.

Whether or not there are ashes on your forehead, today is a day to repent. We know our sin, and it is ever before us. We know the sorry condition of our blackened hearts. We know that we, of our own strength and power **cannot** break down the dividing wall of hostility between us and God. With our own strength, we cannot return to the presence of our God. The ashes remind us of our sin. They remind us of the condition of our hearts. But ashes in the sign of the cross remind us also of a gracious and merciful God.

We who are helpless and hopeless sinners are told, “Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (Joel 2:13). We can do nothing to fix the problem of our sin, but we have a God who has willingly done everything. Ashes show our sin; ashes in the sign of the cross show our Savior. (Confirmands, I’m spoon feeding law and gospel to you right now. Write it down in your sermon notes. Ashes show our sin. That’s the law. Ashes in the sign of the cross show our Savior. That’s the Gospel.)+

The cross was an instrument of torture and death and the means by which God cleansed our hearts. There at Golgotha Jesus was stripped of His robe and hangs naked in our stead. All our sin is on him, and it leads to his shame, for He who knew no sin became sin for us. We attempt to cover our sin, but Jesus reveals it

so that it might be washed away by His blood. “Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrow.” Surely he has forgiven our sins. Remember what Luther said? “Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation.” 8th graders, write that under the Gospel. I don’t want to see that under the Law. Write that under the Gospel. “Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation.”

A gracious and merciful God has offered up His only-begotten Son so that the sin that has exiled us from His presence might be washed away and we might be restored to His presence. It’s a journey where the Lord brings us back to himself. He doesn’t leave us in the dust. He brings us right into the courts of heaven!

Listen to the words of St. John as he describes those who are gathered around the throne of the Lamb in His kingdom:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, **clothed in white robes**, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

Note those who are worshipping the Savior are clothed in white robes. These are no fig leaves! These are no filthy rags! These are no tattered jeans or dirty t-shirts. These are white robes, the color of purity, robes that have been cleansed, washed in the blood of the Lamb. Their garments of sackcloth are nowhere to be seen. They’ve been exchanged for robes of righteousness, for the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

Fig leaves and animal hides cannot cover over blackened hearts corrupted by sin, nor can Versace or

Hugo Boss. The only way back is through genuine repentance. We're not turning back to a God who is going to tear us to pieces. We're turning back to a God who is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." We're turning back to a God who endured the shame of the cross, and whose blood cleanses us from all sin. We're turning back to the Father who welcomes his prodigals home. He takes away our unclean robes and clothes us with the garments of salvation. We're turning back to the God who, as Paul wrote, "loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without stain or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." Thanks be to God! Amen.

(Based on a sermon series written by Dr. Jeffrey Pulse of CTSEFW)

