**Joel 2:12-19 March 1-2, 2022 (Ash Wednesday)**

**Wounded Savior for Wounded People**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is the phrase synonymous with Ash Wednesday. We have all heard it, perhaps on another Ash Wednesday, perhaps at a grave side: “*Dust you are, and to dust you shall return.*” The ashes for which this day is named are a symbol of death, the reality that lies before us all, old and young alike. Dust we are, and to dust we shall return. Sin equals death, the wages of sin is death, the payment of your sins is death and with death comes decay, the return to the dust of the ground.

Our Lenten Series this year focuses on the Wounds of Jesus. Jesus, a man who does nothing wrong suffers many wounds. You’d expect wounds from a soldier, you’d expect wounds from injuries in a difficult profession, even something like carpentry can bring wounds and scars on your body. Construction workers get wounds. Police officers and keepers of the peace may have wounds inflicted upon them when they uphold the law. But a teacher of the people. The Savior of the World. God’s own Son. What Law hast he broken to have such wounds inflicted upon him? The focus of our series will be looking at the wounds of Christ as well as the Hymn, “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” as we will sing different verses every week on Tuesday and Wednesday Nights. As we begin our Lenten journey this evening, we hear the first words of the hymn. **“O Sacred Head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down, now scornfully surrounded, with thorns Thine only crown!”** If ever there was a head that did not call for the ashes of this day, it is His sacred head! Why thorns, when it should be a crown of gold? Here we see in flesh, that One who formed us from the dust at the very beginning. Here is the One who in unfathomable love for our fallen race became dust for us. And now He will even lay down His head in the dust. But there is no sin in Him! In Him there should be no wounds, no hurt, no suffering, no death! How, and why, will He die? We will spend this Lent pondering, in awe, such questions.

In our text for this evening from Joel chapter 2,when Joel declares a sacred fast, when he urges the trumpet to sound and the people to gather, we discover that the occasion is one of return. Lent is always about a return. Of course, we so often think of Lent in terms of turning away from something—what we are giving up, what we will fast from. It’s a tradition to give up something you love during Lent to get in the proper mindset of seeing all that Christ gave up for you, to tap for just a moment in the sacrifice that Christ made on your behalf being wounded, hurt and killed. If he could bear the cross, you can bear giving up desserts for 40 days. You can could try fasting, giving up food for a day or just a few hours, skipping a regular meal on one of the days of the week during Lent. Make no mistake about it, fasting is a good thing. Didn’t our Lord assume that His disciples would do so in our Gospel reading; “*When you fast...*” When, not if! But by itself, fasting can be nothing more than an empty religious exercise. The Lenten fast goes much deeper than your decision to deny yourself some tasty treat. Rather, it invites, it summons, it urges you back to someone, to the Lord. “*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.*” A Lent that is anything less than a return in faith to the Lord is only a religious game and worth less than nothing. The trick to giving up something for Lent is really, not letting anyone else know what it is. It’s not a time to brag about how you are giving up something and then make sure to remind everyone how you are doing in giving it up. That’s not the point, it’s not a practice that lends itself to bragging it’s to tap into the sacrifice of Christ for you.

Rather than play games with God this holy season, hear His summons to you to come back to Him, to return to Him now. He does not want some piece of you, some outward display, like torn garments, or a few minutes tossed His way one day a week. No, He wants you! That is why Joel says: “*Rend your hearts, and not your garments.*”

Lent is not for pretend sinners. Lent is for real, honest-to-God sinners who have failed in their love of God, who have failed in their love of neighbor, who see this reality, and who, by God’s grace, despise their sin and ache for His forgiveness and for strength to do better. And to such sinners the invitation rings out as refreshment: the invitation to return and see the sacred head of your Savior, now wounded. He is the One who knew that we, on our own, could not come to Him, return to Him, or even find Him. So He came to us, returned to us, and found us, and by His cross draws us to Himself.

And we marvel this Lent at how far He went to find us. What he would suffer, the wounds he would bear to save us from sin. It is a marvel indeed that the eternal God should take on human flesh and blood, as He did in the Incarnation. That, all by itself, is enough to leave us astounded forever. But He went further than that. Not only did He take on our flesh and blood, not only did He become dust for us, but He also went so far as to lift from us the burden of our sin, to bear it in His own body to death, to take all our failures to live in love as His very own. Indeed, in the words of St. Paul: “*He who knew no sin, became sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.*” He not only died, but He also died as the greatest sinner of all time, with the sin of the world upon Him, all of it; yours, mine, everyone’s. He who was wounded physically took on the wounds of sin and suffered spiritually by being forsaken by God for you. In this way the Lord revealed that He is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Look to the cross and see! He bore your sin to death that neither death nor sin would be the end of you. Such is the measure of His love.

During Lent, when the Church calls us to return, she is calling us to return to Christ, to draw near to this Savior who was wounded for our transgressions, who was bruised for our iniquities, upon whom was the punishment that brought us peace, and in whose stripes we find healing. She reminds us that the only real life in this whole world is found when we are in fellowship with Him, and that every time we have settled for something less, we have allowed ourselves to be deceived and cheated of that great gift of which our baptism has made us heirs. And as often as she sets her table, the Church calls for all her children to return, to come to this wounded Savior who bore our wounds in His own flesh, shedding His blood for us, so that His flesh might be our living bread from heaven and His blood the blotting out of our every sin.

“*Dust you are, and to dust you shall return.*” But the cross reminds us that we have a Savior who became dust for us, whose sacred head was laid in the dust of death, that the dust of our corrupted being might become incorruptible in Him. It is no wonder, then, that, pondering such love, the Church raises her voice to that sacred head and rejoices to call it her very own, her greatest treasure.

Amen

The peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus always.

 Amen.