

Ash Wednesday

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Date: 02 March 2022

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[0:00] Getting started. So, if you, we'll turn your Bible to Isaiah 58. We'll mostly be in there, but all the readings this evening we'll be referencing.

! St. Augustine coined that term to describe the human condition in rebelling against God. Our first parents were curved in on themselves when they rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden. And all of us, since then, by the fact that we are human and of this earthly sinful flesh, we are predisposed to be curved in on ourselves.

Luther comes later, hundreds of years later, and considers this phrase, and he adopts this conception of the nature of our sinfulness. For Martin Luther, our sinfulness takes the form of a fundamental self-concern.

That means that we are curved in on ourselves as we turn inward through the pressure of our, sort of like a centripetal pressure of self-absorption.

[1:31] We can probably all identify with that, right? The root of our sin is often because we want to, we are curved in on ourselves as we're self-absorbed. Even when it's relational sin, I want to get my way, or that person offended me, or that person is not appreciating me enough.

It's always self-focus. This, in this covenant, according to St. Augustine and according to Martin Luther, it turns us off, not only from God, it turns us off from God, but also it turns us off from other people, from our neighbors around us.

As you know, we are created by God, originally, to be turned upwards towards God in worship. That is God's creational intent for us.

It is our sin and our rebellion that turns us away from God and into ourselves. And when that happens, we're not only are we distant and separated from God, and not living as we were created to be, not looking upward, but we're also turning away from one another, from our neighbors. So we no longer look upward to God, our creator, to whom we owe rightful worship. We also do not look outward to our neighbor, to whom we owe love and compassion and care.

[3:02] The former precedes the latter. When we turn away from God, we necessarily turn away from one another. And we become our own gods in our own little universes.

And you know what that looks like. It's the brokenness in our world. When we all are our own little gods, we see brokenness, war, disaster, alienation, from the familiar to the whole world, to even nations at each other's throat.

So you see there is a religious dimension or implication to these being turned away from God and turning into ourselves. And that we are not religiously turning towards God, but it's also an ethical implication.

It makes it impossible for us to truly love our neighbor in the kind of selfless way that this love requires. So that we are not then able to accomplish and fulfill what Jesus says is the whole summary, summation of the law, which is to love God and to love neighbor.

We're incapable of doing that. So this is why Lent is actually quite an important season for us in the church year. Because it reminds us of this vital, critical condition that we have.

[4:30] All of us. None of us are excluded from it. It reminded us that we are people that are curved in towards ourselves. And that curving into ourselves is not the way God created us to be.

And it is an unhealthy pattern that brings death, that brings destruction, that brings alienation first from God and from one another. And the season of Lent reminds us then to turn, turn back to God. And as we know, the season of Lent ends in Good Friday. And then it ends on Easter Sunday, the season.

And so it's almost as if we're going on a journey, on a pilgrimage, in the wilderness, these 40 days. The 40 days of significance in the Bible as a time when God calls His people out, away from the

world, to turn to Him.

He called Israel out of Egypt. He could have easily got them to the Canaan-Lent promise. But He let them wander in the wilderness for that 40 years in order to show them that they need their God and Savior and their Redeemer.

[5:51] And then, so that they may turn to God. And they fought that, didn't they? And we also do. The only person that has rightfully gone into the wilderness and totally and completely given Himself to His Creator is our Lord Jesus Christ in His wilderness journey.

But even though this is a hard thing for us to do, we are called to do it. And we know that we're not doing it in our own might. This is also quite important for us to understand during this season of Lent.

It isn't a piety that saves us. We look in the passage that we read in Isaiah 58. These people are said to be, they are said to be by the prophet Isaiah in verse 2.

They seek God daily. They delight to know God's ways. But God knows really what they're about. Just like Jesus has said earlier in the Gospel reading.

They're the same kind of people here in Isaiah 58. They're the same as the Pharisees of Jesus' time. They are doing it for religious so that men could see. And they might even, they're even, these people are even doing it so that God may see.

[7:06] And then, because we know that they're looking so that God may see because they, they finally ask God, where are you? We fasted. Do you not see it? We've humbled ourselves.

Do you not take knowledge of it? But God knows their heart. He knows they're hypocrites. He says to them, this isn't the fast that I've chosen.

Your fasting is, while you are fasting and purporting to turn towards me, you're still oppressing all your workers. you're quarreling among each other.

You have wicked fists lifted up against God and one another. This isn't the fasting that I've chosen, God tells them. It isn't just to put on sackcloth and put ashes on your forehead.

It is to turn your old self towards me. How do I know that you're not turning yourself towards me? God says to them through the prophet Isaiah. I know this because you are wicked.

[8:08] you are not the kind of people who are looking out to those around you to love them as I would have you do.

And God says to them, this is the fasting that I've chosen. It's the fasting to lose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of yoke, to let the oppressed among you go free, to break every yoke.

is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into your house and when you see the naked to cover him, this is the fasting I've chosen.

The fasting, first thing, verse 6, is to loosen the bonds of wickedness to undo the straps of the yoke. It's not so much that the people themselves are doing this. It is God doing it through them after God has first done it in them.

And this is the fasting that God is calling us to in this season of Lent. It's to turn away from ourselves, to turn to God, to say to God, to ask God in His power, in His might, to loosen this yoke of sin over our lives.

[9:17] To loosen the yoke of sin that keeps us curved into ourselves and away from God. That keeps us curved into ourselves away from our neighbor. We cannot do that in our own strength and power.

This Lenten season reminds us as the words of, of, as the ashes has been, has been put on, reminds us, we are mortal. We are finite beings.

We are dust. And so, as we go through this season of Lent, I beseech you, brothers and sisters in Christ, let us look, let us go forward.

Having before us the cross as our destination as we go through this Lent. Let us have before us Good Friday. Let us know that the Lenten season is not, it's not because we are, our will is, our human will is good and we get, we can choose between good and evil.

We can't choose between good and evil left to ourselves. we will constantly be in this condition of being curved in to ourselves. Let us not, let us not deceive ourselves to think that our piety will give us power to choose between good and evil.

[10:35] Let us, let us not deceive ourselves in thinking that our virtue will help us with, will help us to attain by human effort righteousness with God. let us not think that the cross of Christ is just an

example.

Rather, let us think, let us have the theology of the cross in mind. Let us know that our will is bound to sin without Christ Jesus helping us, redeeming us, calling us to himself, and the Holy Spirit indwelling us, empowering us to overcome sin.

Let us remember and know that it's only by grace that righteousness, that righteousness belongs to God, that righteousness is Christ's alone, and that is righteousness, it's freely given to all of us who come to him.

Let us remember the cross of Jesus Christ. Let us remember that the cross is a necessary sacrifice by which we are able to attain redemption.

And as we do this, as we turn to God, God will turn to us. In fact, he is the father looking to the far country for the prodigal son to come home.

[12:04] And I think this time of Lent is a time for us to pray. some of us are prodigal sons away from God, or we know some prodigal sons that have been gone away from God.

This is a time to, in fasting and prayer, commit those loved ones to God in this season of Lent, that they will come home. And it is for us, too, who are the elder brother, who have been in the house, not to think that our piety is what makes us sons of God and daughters of God, but it is Christ's righteousness, not to take foot stock in our own human effort, but to rest in Christ's finished work. I want to end by praying this prayer from the book of Common Prayer. It is a prayer that is often used as the body is being put in the grave.

But I think it's a prayer that reminds us that we are finite, immortal, human beings, that death is a surety, but it also reminds us, even in this prayer, that Christ is a redeemer and a savior.

And because of him, death does not have the final word. So today, as I put the ash on your forehead, be reminded that indeed you are from dust, and to dust you should return.

[13:34] But the sign has been put on your sign of the cross. Be reminded also, brothers and sisters in Christ, that Christ, because he came in this mortal, finite body, he conquered death for our sake.

And because of his death, we can live, and live abundantly, alive with God, that is, peace with God, and abundance with God, and righteousness before God.

It is our portion when we know this. Let me read this prayer for us, and pray along with me. Man that is born of a woman, hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery.

He comes up and is cut down like a flower. He flies as it were a shadow, and he never continues in one stay. In the midst of life, we be in death.

Of whom may we seek for help, but of thee, O Lord, which for our sins justly are displeased. Yet, O Lord God, most holy, O Lord God, most mighty, O holy and most merciful Savior, deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death.

[15:02] You know, O Lord, the secret of our hearts. Shut not your merciful eyes to our prayers, but spare us, Lord most holy, O God most mighty, O holy and merciful Savior, that thou who are most worthy judge eternal, suffer us not at our last hour for any pains of death to fall from thee.

Suffer us not at our last hour for any pains of death to fall from thee. That is our prayer in this season of Lent, that God will help us to turn to God and that we may not fall from him because he is the only source of life, true life and true abundance.

may God have pause by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.