

Ash Wednesday

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[0 : 00] Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. The words from today is the Holy Gospel in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. The first lesson in evening prayer for Ash Wednesday is Jonah chapters 3 and 4.

I hope you will take the time to read that lesson this evening. Chapter 3 is the account of what the people of Nineveh did after Jonah proclaimed they had 40 days to repent, or the city would be overthrown.

Jonah chapter 3 verses 5 through 9 tells us, So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.

Then word came to the king of Nineveh, and he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh, that neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything.

But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God. Yes, let everyone turn from his evil way, and from the violence that is in his hands. Yahweh was not the God of the Ninevites.

[1 : 15] They were pagans. And yet they believed God's word, proclaimed by the prophet Jonah. They fasted and wore sackcloth.

They turned from the horrors of their sin-filled lives. Because they did, God spared them from judgment. Each year on Ash Wednesday, the church takes the role of Jonah.

She proclaims the message of repentance and administers ashes. She then affords us this season of Lent, which is 46 days, including the Sundays, to repent and turn from the sins in our lives.

While we no longer put on sackcloth and sit in ashes, we do mark ourselves with ashes, and are called to use this season as a time of prayer and fasting.

How strict that fasting is depends on our overall health and how labor-intensive our work is. But some form of fasting, or at minimum some sort of abstinence from certain foods, is greatly encouraged as a spiritual discipline.

[2 : 26] But as Jesus says in the gospel lesson, we are fasting merely for show. Or if this mark of ashes on our foreheads is only for show, then we have already received our reward.

But if we fast to gain spiritual discipline, if these ashes are a type of spiritual war paint, then our reward will be in the future. Now if we are going to be successful in our Lenten campaign against sin, then like the Ninevites, we must start with repentance.

The likeness of God, the new man, restored to us in holy baptism, cannot fully develop. We cannot become holy if we live with unrepented sin.

The bedrock of Christianity is repentance. Christ died to forgive sins, and we can only receive that forgiveness if we repent of our sins.

1 John 1.9 states, If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

[3 : 43] After enduring His 40 days in the wilderness, the first words Jesus proclaimed were, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. We can read and know our Bibles all we want.

We can be amassed twice a week and every holy day. But if we do not sincerely repent of our sins each day, if we are too proud to receive the sacrament of penance, which is really the sacrament of conversion, if we will not turn from our sins and strive against their return, then all we are is religious.

And we know what Jesus said about the religious. We will not be reformed in the likeness of God unless we live a life of repentance.

1 John 1.6 and 7 states, If we say that we have fellowship with Him and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with

one another and the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanses us from all sin.

So brethren, in Lent, we have two choices. We can make and execute a battle plan for spiritual warfare or shore up and deepen a commitment that we've already enacted.

[5 : 08] Today, Ash Wednesday, could be the day we repent, turn from our sins, and launch our battle plan of Lenten discipline that leads to a holy life.

Or we can sit back and go through the religious motions. Being at this Mass and receiving these ashes can be the only Lenten discipline we partake of.

Who would know? Though after these 40 days, we will not face the judgment the Ninevites would have, one day we will face judgment, eternal judgment.

The outcome of that judgment may be determined by what we start to do during this Lent. Let us then read Jonah chapter 3 and 4 this evening.

And then let us do as the Ninevites did. Let us turn from our sins. Lent has begun. May we repent and let the battle begin.

[6 : 12] In the name of the Father, the song of the Holy Ghost. Amen.