

Ash Wednesday

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[0 : 0 0] Turn ye even to me, says the Lord, with all your heart. Words from this afternoon's lesson in Joel, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Amen. Throughout the pre-Lent or Jessima season, the prayer book's evening prayer lectionary had us read from the prophecies of Amos and Hosea.

Both of these prophets were real men who wrote in a real time of history. They were contemporaries, both writing in the 8th century BC.

Both prophesied the coming judgment of God upon the nations of Israel and Judah, which had been divided from each other in 930 BC. Though Israel and Judah were God's chosen people, their sinfulness had become so great, and their hearts had become so hard, that they no longer could hear God calling them back to repentance.

Because of this, God was going to send enemies to attack them and take them captive. Israel proper would never be restored.

[1 : 1 4] Israel today is the continuation of the restored Judah. Judah would be restored, but only after 70 years of exile in Babylon.

And only because God had promised David that, because of his faithfulness, there would always be one to sit on his throne. These prophecies are important to us as Christians, based on what St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10, verse 11.

Now all these things happen unto them, for examples, and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are to come.

These prophecies are important because before God judged the people of Israel and Judah, he gave them so much and warned them so patiently. Through Abraham, he had brought them into covenant with him, sealing it with circumcision.

Through Moses, he delivered them from captivity in Egypt and gave them the righteous law. Through David, his kingdom was visibly established, and by Solomon, he dwelt among them in his temple.

[2 : 2 6] But still, they rejected God. They turned away from him to idols. They worshipped pagan gods and even sacrificed their children unto them.

Despite this, God did not immediately give up on them. He said prophet after prophet to them, warning them, pleading with them even, to repent and return to him.

But they refused, leaving God no other choice but to bring his wrath upon them and judge them by the hands of the Assyrians and the Babylonians.

All that happened to Israel and Judah is important for us today because we are today in the place they were at that time. The church is the people whom God has brought into covenant with himself through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We've been given the sacrament of holy baptism to sign and seal that covenant upon us. We've been given sacred scripture, both the Old and now the New Testaments, to instruct us on how God wants us to live.

[3 : 36] The scriptures are for us, real men and women, at this real time in history. He has given us the church fathers and the godly bishops and priests over the centuries now to help us rightly divide and live out that instruction.

Above all he has given us, his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, to die for us, for our sins. And then he has given us the means to feed upon his resurrected life in the Holy Eucharist.

Jesus Christ is the one who today sits on David's throne. But what has the church, what is the church, at least much of it, doing with these great blessings?

Are we, like Israel and Judah, just taking them for granted? Too many toss aside God's means of grace so casually. And when we look around, what do we see as the result?

We see many Christians that have become idolaters, like Israel and Judah, and even worse. Our idols are not ignorant pieces of wood and stone.

[4 : 54] No, our idols are sophisticated. Our idols are the world, the flesh, and the devil, dressed up and accepted as so many niceties.

Our idols are smartphones and computers, sports and entertainment celebrities, possessions and passions. Our children are sacrificed by apostate clergy in their churches, lawmakers, school boards, and righteous Christian laymen and women who just turn them over to these masses, these groups.

We even have doctors in clinics sacrificing our children. Now, of course, there are righteous clergy and righteous Christian men and lay women out there who are striving to live faithfully, speaking the truth, and willing to lead.

But so many just yawn and roll over. Others say, I agree now, please move out of the way, I want to watch my reality TV show. Who are we listening to?

Whose way are we following? What is important to us? What can we not live without? We don't have to be doing overt evil to be following the way of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

[6 : 22] In fact, Satan prefers gray over black because it fools us into thinking we're just fine. My brothers and sisters, as he did with Israel and Judah, so one day God will judge his church.

St. Peter states, judgment will begin with the church. When that day and hour is, no man knows. But Jesus has made it clear that day will come.

What will happen to us on that day? Will we end up eternally? We need to consider this now, today, while we can.

As Hebrews chapter 3 states, today, if you will hear his voice, harden not your hearts. As it was for Israel and Judah, one day it will be too late for us also.

And yet for today, it is not too late. For today there is forgiveness, restoration, and the assurance of eternal life in Jesus Christ. But to obtain that assurance, we need to hear the warning, heed the warning in God's word.

[7 : 41] We need to believe and follow the way of Jesus Christ. This afternoon's lessons instruct us on what we are to do and how to get started.

In the gospel, Jesus tells us to, lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust do corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust do corrupt, and where thieves do not break through and steal.

This is wholly our choice. God gives us the grace, but we need to use it. And then in the lesson from Joel, we are told how to get started.

Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the people, sanctify the congregation, let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, spare thy people, O Lord, and give not thine heritage to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them.

The trumpet is being blown today. The fast is being initiated. The people are gathered today, here on Ash Wednesday, and we have joined with the faithful in the church throughout the whole world.

[9 : 08] Today. May we remain faithful through these next 40 days and onward. May we keep a holy Lent.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.