

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Psalm 103:8-14
2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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Ash Wednesday
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“We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

In the words of St. Paul today we find deep contrasts. Apostles, he says, and all Christians, may find themselves sorrowful, yet at the same time having deep cause for rejoicing. Dying, and yet alive. These are the sharp contrasts, the paradoxes, even, of the Christian life.

We know struggle and hardship, pain and perhaps deprivation, and yet there is something deep within us: a life, a joy that has been planted in our souls (sometimes we ourselves may even struggle to find it, but it is there). It is a *hope*. That, I think, is the best word for it.

We may not, cannot, be happy all the time. Sometimes we suffer, grieve, are worn out and exhausted. But we have seen the empty tomb - the light beyond the present darkness, and there is a seed of hope in us that has already begun to grow.

We find contrasts throughout our liturgy today. In the words of St. Paul which I just repeated. And as we pray the words of Psalm 51 we will remember our sinfulness before God, the transgressions that are “ever before our eyes” if we look at ourselves with honesty.

But the psalm will keep going back and forth. In one line we will speak of sin, in the next we speak of being cleansed, and pure. In one we will acknowledge that God may justly look on us in judgment, because we do wrong. Yet in the next line we will hear that God looks for “truth deep within us”.

We will hear of the suffering that is the consequence of sin, and we will hear of the joy and gladness of God’s forgiveness and faithful love, so much more faithful a love than our own.

And *that* is the great contrast of our daily Christian life – that we return again and again to sin – that we reject God’s love, reject and hurt our neighbors, friends, family, and the world. And yet God stands before us and says “Peace”, and offers forgiveness. That’s a shocking thing!

It’s astonishing. Have you ever grasped the fullness of that astonishing fact? I think that the joy of that astonishment actually comes especially when we are face to face with the real seriousness of our sin.

Perhaps if you have ever gone to Private Confession – made use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, you may have a particular sense of what I mean. It is a practice I heartily commend – I believe it changes lives. There is something really astonishing that happens in it every single time!

When I go to confession, I admit aloud some things that I never, ever want to admit aloud. I say some things about my actions and my internal life that make me look pretty bad – that make me look like a sinner.

Somehow, in my own head, there are a lot of thoughts and actions that I can rationalize to myself – I think about the difficult circumstances I was in, or how frustrating that other person was, or how I didn’t really intend to hurt so-and-so.

And I give myself the benefit of the doubt that really, I’m a good person, and these “mistakes” are minor, not a big deal, shouldn’t be given too much weight. And God must understand, of course, I think, since He knows my heart!

But when I make myself say these sins out loud to another person, they don’t sound quite so small. When I state them frankly, without a list of excuses, they don’t seem so justified. And I find myself face to face with the reality that I have sinned. That I have done wrong, hurt others, failed to live as God has called me to live. And that’s not fun to face. But it does teach me a lot about myself, and helps me look at myself more honestly.

And then *here’s* the moment when the astonishing thing happens: after I list these things to the priest. After I mess up my own projected image of being good or holy, so that both of us can see, to my embarrassment, that I am a sinner, and I feel remorse, then the priest says this:

“You’re forgiven.”

This is *astonishing* when it happens. That after I admit to things that I can see now are seriously wrong, and make me feel ashamed, the priest looks at me with love and mercy.

And of course, that’s not the main thing. The priest is simply a sign, or a conduit for something else – for Christ looking at me with love and mercy and saying “I forgive you.” Right after everything I just admitted out loud to Him.

That is so astonishing that it feels like a massive burden has suddenly been lifted off my shoulders. Like I have a fresh start, and peace, and joy, and hope that maybe this time I’ll keep God in mind just a bit more, look at my neighbor with just a bit more love, keep stumbling, or turning from God, but then turn back, little by little, helped by this grace of forgiveness and reconciliation, until I can stand facing God straight-on, awash with His light.

We may be able to feel God’s love most of all in these moments, when it is revealed in sharp contrast to the burden of our sins.

We will say the Litany of Penitence together in a few minutes. I have realized that it is one of the best guides for an examination of conscience that I have ever seen. One of the best guides to help us recognize where we have sinned and prepare to confess it.

It’s thorough, it covers all sorts of ways that we do wrong, hurt others, hurt ourselves, and don’t live up to what is right. And it makes me feel conviction of my sin, and repentance.

And it ends with the light of hope – that Jesus doesn’t want us to suffer for our sins, He wants us to turn toward Him and have life. If we repent, He offers us a path toward purity, holiness, and eternal joy.

And that’s a perfect way to start Lent – seeing the light of hope and life in contrast to the real darkness of our sins. I pray that you may feel the astonishing wonder of this contrast, too, as we travel through this liturgy together.

I pray that you may feel with honesty the weight of sin and be startled by the astonishing release of forgiveness.

I pray that it may inspire you to make a fresh start – to turn back to God with love like the love He has for you.

I pray that it may inspire you to seek God every day this Lent – in prayer, in worship, in study, and in reverence for the presence of God in the people around you.

I pray that it might lead you to seek out a priest, when the burden of sin feels heavy or impossible to set down, or when you have trouble feeling it, so that you may feel and be assured of God’s forgiveness and love.

And I pray that in a few moments, when you receive the mark of the ashes on your forehead, you may feel the power of the contrast in that symbol, as well. These ashes, from the burnt, dead palms of last Palm Sunday, are signs of death – of our mortality – of the most dire consequence of sin.

But we do not just smear them on our foreheads, think of our mortality, and despair. We make the sign of the *cross*. A sign that itself looks like a symbol of death, an instrument of execution, but is no longer that.

By making the sign of the cross with these ashes, we make the sign of our Lord Jesus, who died in pain upon a cross and then burst through death and returned to life.

I pray that you may remember that He has blazed a path for us – a path from sin to grace, a path from and through death into life. Into hope. Into joy and peace and an end of pain.

And finally I pray that you might consider, as leave this place, wearing that sign, the sign of that contrast, on your forehead as a sign to others.

Not a sign of your piety, or proof that you went to church today – if having people respond that way appeals to you, you may want to wipe your forehead when you leave.

But if you are feeling a little shy, a little embarrassed about the mark that will soon be on your face, consider keeping it. Consider how it and *you*, today and every day, may be a sign that death is not actually the end. That love has proved stronger than sin or death. That there is hope in this world.

And if someone does ask you why you have something on your face, I pray you consider telling them that.

Amen.