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Ash Wednesday
February 26, 2020
Immanuel Lutheran, Michigan City
“Fighting the Old Adam”

On Ash Wednesday we remember that we are constantly at war. Of our enemies – the devil, the world, and the Old Adam – probably the Old Adam we fail to recognize the most. Also known as the Old Man, sinful flesh, sinful nature, and original sin, we often forget that he’s there (not that we have a dual personality or something like that, but we have something like a disease which has infected our entire person so that we cannot ever be without sin this side of heaven). And, although we desire to do good, to love God and our neighbor and to obey His commands, we have another desire to not obey and sin. This sinful desire is also sin itself, we call it concupiscence. Concupiscence is a lust for all the things we shouldn’t have.

When we were born, we had nothing but the Old Man in us and we could not come to God, believe in Him, or do anything pleasing to Him. We earned only God’s wrath for our sins. But in came the Holy Spirit in our Baptism. We were washed of our sins and made right with God. We were given eternal salvation as a free gift. And the Spirit drowned that Old Man, destroyed his power and gained the upper hand for us, so that we are not slaves to sinful desires anymore. The Spirit raised us with a New Man – that is, we became a new creation, with true faith, godly love, and a desire to serve God.

But, although terribly weakened and in submission to the Spirit, the Old Man remained. It continues to fight against the desires of the Spirit. As St. Paul wrote in Romans 7, “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in

my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.” For example, the Spirit might say, “Help your wife prepare dinner,” but the flesh will say, “Just relax on that couch and let her do it.” The Spirit will say, “You should go fill that poor person’s gas tank,” but the flesh will say, “You need that money for yourself.”

The Old Man gives us a lust for breaking all the Ten Commandments. Against the first three commandments – You shall have no other gods; you shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God; and remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy – the Old Man burns with pride. Against the fourth commandment, “honor your father and mother,” the Old Man produces rebellious thoughts; against the fifth, “you shall not murder,” anger; against the sixth, “you shall not commit adultery,” sexual lust; against the seventh, “you shall not steal,” coveting (which also happens to be the ninth and tenth commandments). The Old Man is like a campfire that has been doused with water, but the coals are still glowing. And since the coals are still glowing, the last thing you would want to do would be to throw more wood on them. As Paul writes in Galatians 6:8, “The one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”

Thus, during Lent we remember the importance of mortification of the flesh. Mortification means “to put to death.” For example, Paul writes in Colossians 3:5, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” We repent of our sins, and then master the sinful flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit. You want gluttony? I will fast. You want drunkenness? I will stay away from bars and drunken parties. You want laziness? I will work even harder. You want sexual immorality? I

will keep myself from situations where I'll be tempted. You want money and possessions? I will give them away. You want idolatry? I will increase my prayers. This practice is of mortification ongoing, it is not just confined to Lent or any particular time, lest we give the flesh license to sin some other time of year. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9, "I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."

During Lent we emphasize things like fasting, almsgiving, and prayer as a reminder of our sinfulness and need of grace; that our greatest hunger, more for bodily needs, should be for the Word of God which is our power over sin and death; and that our sinful flesh continues to need to be put to death. Lutherans do not ever make laws about mortification like some Christians do for a couple reasons. First, you might struggle with gluttony, but the person next to you has other sinful desires. What good is fasting from meat if you are already a vegetarian? Fasting and giving will look different for different people. Also, when you make personal piety like this into a law, it becomes a work to fulfill in order to be a good Christian or to be pleasing to God, but you are made pleasing to God by His grace alone and not by works. And if you perform these things in order to make yourself holy or earn your status before God, you destroy the Gospel and your works become not only displeasing to God, but harmful to your salvation. Thus, the Lord says things like in Joel chapter 2: "rend your hearts and not your garments." God desires a heart of faith, not the mere performance of works. This was the problem of Jesus' day also. Jesus said, "Give to the poor, pray, and fast in secret." The Lord cares about your heart, that you are doing these things in genuine love and not for the reward of praise and admiration or to make yourselves holier. Do it because you love God and your neighbor.

Put on ashes before you put on war paint! If you remember that you are dust, you will not put any confidence in the flesh and its desires or your works. The work of salvation is the Lord's. So, cling to Christ who died for your sins on the cross. His truth is your belt; His righteousness, your breastplate; His Gospel makes you ready; faith is your shield to defend you from the devil's attacks; His salvation is your helmet and the Word is your sword. Your battle cry? "Victory belongs to the Lord!"

Your victory belongs to the Lord, who became man in order to be tempted as you are and die as you do, without sinning. After His baptism, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to battle the devil. Jesus fasted, prayed, helped the needy, and rebuked and overcame every temptation. He offered His perfect, obedient life to God for you and won victory over the power of sin, death, and the devil. Our Lord comes to you with His conquering might to absolve you of sins, conquer your hearts with the Gospel and empower you for the new life of the Spirit, and to feed your bodies with His sinless body and blood.

Mortify the flesh, lest you return to a slavery to sin, but remember that the victory is Christ's, who is the death of sin and the death of death. Since you are baptized into Him, your death will be the death of the Old Man. You will be forever freed from sin and its desires. And your resurrection is a resurrection only of the New Man, an incorruptible body and soul and mind.

You are dust and to dust you shall return, but you are also Christ's and to Christ you shall return. Thus, your dust is shaped like the cross. You are marked by His redemption. You are put to death and raised with Him. And you will serve Him in everlasting righteous, innocence, and blessedness. Amen.