

## **Introduction**

On Ash Wednesday we begin our forty-day journey toward Easter with a day of fasting and repentance. Marking our foreheads with dust, we acknowledge that we die and return to the earth. At the same time, the dust traces the life-giving cross indelibly marked on our foreheads at baptism. While we journey through Lent to return to God, we have already been reconciled to God through Christ. We humbly pray for God to make our hearts clean while we rejoice that “now is the day of salvation.” Returning to our baptismal call, we more intentionally bear the fruits of mercy and justice in the world.

## **Prayer of the Day**

Gracious God, out of your love and mercy you breathed into dust the breath of life, creating us to serve you and our neighbors. Call forth our prayers and acts of kindness, and strengthen us to face our mortality with confidence in the mercy of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.  
**Amen.**

## **First Reading: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**

*Because of the coming day of the LORD, the prophet Joel calls the people to a community lament. The repentant community declares that God is gracious and asks God to spare the people lest the nations doubt God's power to save.*

<sup>1</sup>Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
    sound the alarm on my holy mountain!  
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,  
    for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—

<sup>2</sup>a day of darkness and gloom,  
    a day of clouds and thick darkness!  
Like blackness spread upon the mountains  
    a great and powerful army comes;  
their like has never been from of old,  
    nor will be again after them  
    in ages to come.

<sup>12</sup>Yet even now, says the LORD,  
    return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;

<sup>13</sup>rend your hearts and not your clothing.  
Return to the LORD, your God,  
    for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
    and relents from punishing.

<sup>14</sup>Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,  
    and leave a blessing behind him,

a grain offering and a drink offering  
for the LORD, your God?

<sup>15</sup>Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
sanctify a fast;

call a solemn assembly;

<sup>16</sup>gather the people.

Sanctify the congregation;

assemble the aged;

gather the children,

even infants at the breast.

Let the bridegroom leave his room,

and the bride her canopy.

<sup>17</sup>Between the vestibule and the altar

let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.

Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD,

and do not make your heritage a mockery,

a byword among the nations.

Why should it be said among the peoples,

'Where is their God?'"

## **Psalm 51:1-17**

<sup>1</sup>Have mercy on me, O God, according to your | steadfast love;  
in your great compassion blot out | my offenses.

<sup>2</sup>Wash me through and through | from my wickedness,  
and cleanse me | from my sin.

<sup>3</sup>For I know | my offenses,  
and my sin is ev- | er before me.

<sup>4</sup>Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil | in your sight;  
so you are justified when you speak and right | in your judgment.

<sup>5</sup>Indeed, I was born | steeped in wickedness,  
a sinner from my | mother's womb.

<sup>6</sup>Indeed, you delight in truth | deep within me,  
and would have me know wisdom | deep within.

<sup>7</sup>Remove my sins with hyssop, and I | shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be pur- | er than snow.

<sup>8</sup>Let me hear | joy and gladness;  
that the body you have broken | may rejoice.

<sup>9</sup>Hide your face | from my sins,  
and blot out | all my wickedness.

<sup>10</sup>Create in me a clean | heart, O God,  
and renew a right spir- | it within me.

- <sup>11</sup>Cast me not away | from your presence,  
and take not your Holy Spir- | it from me.
- <sup>12</sup>Restore to me the joy of | your salvation  
and sustain me with your boun- | tiful Spirit. R
- <sup>13</sup>Let me teach your ways | to offenders,  
and sinners shall be re- | stored to you.
- <sup>14</sup>Rescue me from bloodshed, O God of | my salvation,  
and my tongue shall sing | of your righteousness.
- <sup>15</sup>O Lord, o- | pen my lips,  
and my mouth shall pro- | claim your praise.
- <sup>16</sup>For you take no delight in sacrifice, or | I would give it.  
You are not pleased | with burnt offering.
- <sup>17</sup>The sacrifice of God is a | troubled spirit;  
a troubled and broken heart, O God, you will | not despise.

## **Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:20b--6:10**

*The ministry of the gospel endures many challenges and hardships. Through this ministry, God's reconciling activity in the death of Christ reaches into the depths of our lives to bring us into a right relationship with God. In this way, God accepts us into the reality of divine salvation.*

<sup>20b</sup>We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup>For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

<sup>6:1</sup>As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.

<sup>2</sup>For he says,

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,  
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! <sup>3</sup>We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, <sup>4</sup>but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, <sup>5</sup>beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; <sup>6</sup>by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, <sup>7</sup>truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; <sup>8</sup>in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; <sup>9</sup>as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; <sup>10</sup>as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

## **Gospel Reading: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

*In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commends almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, but emphasizes that spiritual devotion must not be done for show.*

[Jesus said to the disciples:] <sup>1</sup>“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

<sup>2</sup>“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup>But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>5</sup>“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup>But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>16</sup>“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup>But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup>so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>19</sup>“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup>but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

## Prayers of Intercession

Relying on the promises of God, we pray boldly for the church, the world, and all in need.

*A brief silence.*

O God, you call your church to be ministers of reconciliation throughout the world. Inspire your church in its proclamation of the gospel and guide its ministries to build up the body of Christ. Lord, in your mercy,  
hear our prayer.

O God, you created the earth and all its inhabitants and you declared that it is good. Protect mountains and valleys, animals and plants, and direct us to be good stewards of all you have made. Lord, in your mercy,  
hear our prayer.

O God, you desire peace. Direct governments and leaders to work for the well-being of all people and raise up advocates to speak and serve on behalf of the downtrodden. Lord, in your mercy,  
hear our prayer.

O God, you are our hope in the midst of despair, our help in the midst of sorrow, and our consolation in the midst of affliction. Grant comfort to all who suffer in body, mind, or spirit (*especially those who we name now...*) and support caregivers who attend to all in need. Lord, in your mercy,  
hear our prayer.

O God, you are love, and you call us to love one another. Accompany with your grace those journeying toward baptism and call us all to repentance as we prepare to celebrate Christ's death and resurrection. Lord, in your mercy,  
hear our prayer.

O God, you are our life and our salvation. We give you thanks for the righteous who have died in faith. Inspire us by their example to proclaim your steadfast love. Lord, in your mercy,  
hear our prayer.

We entrust ourselves and all our prayers to you, O faithful God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

## ***A reflection for Ash Wednesday...***

### Ashes in Public?

In today's gospel Jesus cautions us against public acts of piety—on the one day of the year we leave worship with a visible smudge on our foreheads, reminding everyone we see that we have been to church. What are you supposed to do, wipe the ashes off before stepping outside? Do you leave them on only to have the cashier at the grocery store say, "You've got something on your forehead"?

Of course Jesus does not tell us to refrain from all acts of public piety. What Jesus seems concerned with is the *why*, not the *what*. Why do you pray in public? Why do you give alms? Why do you fast? If appearing faithful is a way to build yourself up before others, then it is not faithfulness but hypocrisy. On the other hand, if praying over a meal in a restaurant is something you do because praying at meals is part of your faith, by all means bow your head and pray.

As the season of Lent begins each year, God's people are invited to take on three great disciplines: prayer, fasting, and alms-giving. You hear the invitation to prayer, fasting, and alms-giving in the reading from Joel. Jesus' words in the gospel remind us that our acts of faithfulness always come as a response to God's gifts. Remembering this gives a note of humility to all we do. Piety is not something to brag about. Piety is not something to be proud of. Piety is but acknowledgment of the one who first gave us everything.

Finally, Paul makes it clear, as if there were ever any question: we only become righteous in Jesus. We know grace only because Jesus becomes our sin. This is the grounding for everything we do throughout the holy days of Lent.

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