

Ash Wednesday A (3/9/11 – *Drowning Myself Whenever I Can*)

In the Name of JESUS. [Amen]

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. [ECCL 3.1] So says the preacher of ECCLESIASTES. Throughout the *Old Testament*, we see various times when the people of God – as a nation – were under reproach. If you can get past what seems to be tedious history, you will see a vicious cycle in the *Old Testament*. The children of Israel prosper by the hand of God. They begin to take it for granted. Next, they become lax in the practice of the faith. Soon enough they have allowed idols and false worship into their midst. When the discipline of God comes upon them, instead of turning immediately in repentance, they look for some other “savior” from their predicament – a mighty warrior, a neighboring, unbelieving king. Then God removes His protection from them for a season. They are overtaken by heathen nations ... and taken into exile. It is only after they are brought to their knees by a heavy hand that they see where they had sinfully turned away from God – and repent in sackcloth and ashes.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. *Lent* is a particular season and time. One designed by the Church to help us see our own lives in the history of Israel. One designed to aid us in seeing our own sinful rebellion against God and His Word and Will. A season in which we are meant to feel, to some degree, the heavy hand of God against our own sinfulness – so that we might repent ... and do as the prophet Joel exhorted and encouraged Israel as God’s messenger, saying:

“Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. [JOEL 2.12-13] These words were for **all** of Israel ... including believers ... including us.

St. Paul likewise addresses his exhortation to the believers in Corinth. To be sure, there were some pretty aberrant and abhorrent things going on among some of the congregation members there. But these words are addressed to all alike: *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God*

making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. [2COR 5.20] And please note: this is an ongoing imploring that Paul and the other servants of the Word were making to the Corinthians. *We keep on imploring you on behalf of Christ.*

Christ our Lord likewise speaks His words of the *Sermon on the Mount* to a crowd that included both unbelievers and believers. He intends His words for both. This means that they apply to **us** as well. *Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father Who is in heaven,* Jesus warns us all [MT 6.1]. It is OK to be seen by other people doing that which God wants from you. It is OK to have ashes on your forehead – so long as you do not wear them to make **others** think you are righteous ... pious ... devout. You can help people out in public, pray in public, fast and let others know that you are foregoing when asked to partake with them – so long as the “public-ness” of the matter is incidental ... and not done intentionally to draw attention to yourself. For the moment a person **wishes** to look pious and righteous to **others**, he has ceased to be so before God.

Well ... there is yet another sin to repent of. And that is the real thing about our faith life. It must be one of constant ... repeated ... ongoing repentance. Joel urges us to repent. St. Paul exhorts us to be reconciled – through repentance and faith. Christ warns us that we are going to need to repent, since we too often have our eyes and hearts on earthly matters – like things and power and glory for ourselves. It is because of the constant repetition of the call to repentance in Holy Scripture that the first of Luther’s *95 Theses* says: *When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” (MT 4:17), He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.*

To put it another way, I need to be ***Drowning Myself Whenever I Can!*** I need to be living my Baptism **daily**. As Luther explains in the fourth section of his explanation on Holy Baptism: [Baptizing with water] *indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.*

Such daily drowning is a good thing, as we shall learn throughout this *Lententide*. For such baptismal drowning is God's means to a *new creation*. Through Holy Baptism – and by causing us to return to our Baptism through repentance and faith – God is continually re-creating us ... continually restoring us toward that perfect image man had at the Creation (before the Fall). As our Lord says through His Apostle, St. Paul:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, Who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. [2COR 5.16-19]

By His gracious Word and Sacraments, God continually works repentance and faith in our lives – such that we *put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness* [EPH 4.24]. And that re-creating also means that God is renewing us *in knowledge after the image of our Creator* [COL 3.10] – until we are perfectly renewed in heaven.

Like a great and blessed flood, our Baptism – and returning to Baptism – engulfs all that is evil in us. In GENESIS 6 we read: *The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.* [6.5] This wickedness and evil – **our** sins – grieve the heart of God [GEN 6.6]. With a great Flood God purged the earth. Yet in God's great mercy and compassion, by the ark, *eight persons were brought safely through water*, as St. Peter reminds [1PET 3.20]. God has extended to us the olive branch of His peace – since Christ extended His arms upon the tree. Peter goes on to say: *Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ* [3.21].

Like a godless, hard-hearted pharaoh, the devil, the world, and our sinful

flesh keep pursuing us. In His steadfast lovingkindness, God makes for us a way through the sea of sin and death in the world and in our lives. By the exodus of our Savior through His Own Cross and grave, all who dwell in Christ and He in them by faith are brought with unmoistened foot through the treacherous waters of this life into the heavenly Promised Land. Like pharaoh's armies, our sinful thoughts, words, and deeds are drowned in the sea of God's wrath by daily contrition and repentance. And we – by grace – are kept throughout our years of wandering in this world's wilderness until we are brought to the Holy Land.

According to our conception and birth in the flesh, we are as the first-born of the Egyptians. But by the re-birth given in the Holy Spirit, we are born anew from above. Before God, we are as the first-born of the faithful, believing Israelites. With the doorposts and lintels of your hearts covered with the Blood of our Passover Lamb, Jesus Christ, the angel of death sheaths his swords and passes over you – for you are children of God. God has separated you from the multitude of unbelievers and kept you safe and secure in the holy ark of His Christian Church. And by the continual “blowing” of the Spirit, where and when He pleases in Word and Sacrament, you are ever regenerated through repentance and faith – so that your place in the heavenly kingdom is sustained.

For through Holy Baptism, you have been united to the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, just as Holy Scripture promises: ***Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by Baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His.*** [ROM 6.3-5] You have Christ's righteousness. His very Own fasting and prayers have been accounted to you by grace through faith. Thus, even in the midst of a season that looks at your sin as the cause of Jesus' death, you may have true and lasting joy in the heavenly treasure of forgiveness, life, and salvation in Christ.

In the Name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]