

**“The Secret of Repentance”
 (Rend Your Heart, Not Your Garments)
 Ash Wednesday - March 5, 2025
 Joel 2:1-2, 12-13 & Psalm 51:1-5, 10-12, 16-17
 Preached at Messiah Lutheran, Joliet Illinois
 by Pastor David Nygard**

All Bible passages are taken from the New International Version (NIV)

Joel 2:1-2, 12-13 **2 Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill.** Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand—² a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was in ancient times nor ever will be in ages to come. ¹² **“Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.”** ¹³ **Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.**

Psalm 51:1-5, 10-12, 16-17 ¹ **Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;** according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. ² **Wash away all my iniquity** and cleanse me from my sin. ³ **For I know my transgressions,** and my sin is always before me. ⁴ **Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight;** so, you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. ⁵ Surely, I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. ... ¹⁰ **Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.** ¹¹ **Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.** ¹² **Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me...** ¹⁶ You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. ¹⁷ **My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Thank you for coming to our Ash Wednesday Service. God is in this place. Jesus can be found wherever two or more gather in his name. Listen to his voice. Let him speak to your heart.

Tonight, we begin the season of Lent. Lent is 40 days of prayer and repentance. The hymns are often sad, reflective and worshipful. Lent is 40 days long in remembrance of the 40 days that Jesus spent in the

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Wilderness tempted by the devil. After that struggle with temptation Jesus took a path that led him directly to his death on the cross. Ash Wednesday prepares our hearts for the sadness of Good Friday and the joy of Easter Sunday.

In some Christian denominations people come before the pastor or priest, who then marks their foreheads with ashes. It is a sign of repentance. Ashes remind us that God created us from dust and to dust and ashes we will return one day. In the Bible people often humbled themselves before God by dressing in sackcloth or burlap, and covering themselves with ashes. It was their way of saying that we don't deserve God's forgiveness, but we humbly seek his mercy.

Some Lutheran churches put ashes on the heads of their repentant members. Many Lutheran churches do not. It is a nice remembrance but not a requirement. I've never gotten used to it. Just a few years ago about this time I noticed a man with a big black spot on his forehead. I thought "The poor guy. He must have walked into a door." Only later did I realize "Oh, it's Ash Wednesday."

The six Sundays that lead up to Good Friday are not considered as part of Lent. They are meant to be celebrated like little Easters. The music is happier and full of praise.

The real purpose of Ash Wednesday is for us to take a deep look into our hearts and be honest with God. If we are honest with God, we admit that we sin daily in thought, word, and deed. If we're honest with God, we confess that we have no one else to blame for our sins. We take full responsibility for our failures.

In theory that sounds easy and straight forward, but I don't think that many of us know how to apologize or repent. We think it's enough if we say "Sorry. I'm Sorry". I've known abusive individuals and people with horrible addictions after years of trouble finally apologize to their families by saying "I am sorry". They never understand why the family isn't impressed.

Sometimes when we apologize to a person, we say "If I hurt you, I am sorry." Which they hear as 'If you are so sensitive to what I did, that you

feel hurt, then I am sorry.” It’s more honest to say that “I know that I hurt you. You did not deserve it. I was wrong to do it. Please forgive me.”

When we hear that God wants us to confess our sins and failures, we often think, “I’m not so bad.” “I try to be a good person.” “I belong to a church”. “I do good things.”

We all do good things, but how many times do I need to cut the lawn of my elderly neighbor before I make up for my prejudice, sarcastic jokes and selfish habits? Trying to earn our way to heaven is a hard, hard way to get there.

Too often when we think of our sins and mistakes, we make excuses, we blame others, or we deny the pain that we caused someone. But we aren’t fooling God or our family. They know us.

I didn’t understand what it meant to ask forgiveness until I was in high school. It was one of many difficult lessons that God sent my way. I am still learning.

I hurt a girl in our church youth group. It wasn’t something awful, but I crossed the line and hurt her. I was wrong. She stopped coming to our youth group. Other teens were taking sides. So, I stayed home too.

Finally, I called her on the phone to apologize. I stumbled with my words. She said, “I won’t forgive you until you can tell me how you made me feel by your actions.”

I struggled to understand what she meant. I struggled to find the words. After a while I said that “I probably made you feel unimportant and like your feelings didn’t matter. I made you feel like I didn’t value you as a Christian sister. If that’s how I made you feel, I had no right to do so, and I am sorry.” She responded “That’s exactly how I felt. I forgive you.” And she did, and we never spoke of it again.

I think that our repentance with God and our apologies to others ring most true when we think about how our actions touched and hurt them.

The word “repent” means that we “turn” around and change directions. We’ve been acting sinful in one way, but it’s now our desire to change directions. We want our actions to be loving, kind and honest.

The prophet Joel gives us another word for “repent”. The word is “rend.” In fact, he gives us the secret to repentance. We read “**Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love...**”

The word “rend” means to “rip apart” or “tear open”. In Bible times when people were repentant, angry or full of grief, they might tear apart or rip to shreds their clothes. It was dramatic. It expressed emotion. But it was often just for show.

Joel encouraged people to “**rend your heart and not your garments.**” He meant that it’s better to rip open one’s heart and see the sin that is there and then confess it.

Jesus taught us the Lord’s Prayer. He teaches us what to ask for in prayer. We can pray for God’s will to be done. We can pray for our needs to be met and for the ability to forgive and be forgiven.

Psalm 51 is a beautiful prayer that teaches us how to humbly ask God for his mercy. They say that King David wrote Psalm 51. He probably wrote it after he committed adultery with Bathsheba and caused the death of her husband. If so, he had a great deal to feel sorry about.

If you have difficulty finding the right words to tell God, you might just use David’s words or paraphrase them.

David prayed, “**Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love...**” David didn’t say “I deserve to be forgiven.” He humbly asked for God’s mercy, the gift of God’s amazing grace. If you take each letter in grace and assign a word to it, Grace becomes “**God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.**”

David prayed, “**Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me...**” When we sin against God or others we feel dirty inside, ashamed, afraid,

The only thing that washes away our guilt is the blood that Jesus shed for us on the cross.

David prayed, **“For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.”** He confesses that he can’t forget what he has done. David couldn’t forget how he betrayed Bathsheba and robbed her husband of his life. His sins haunted David.

David prayed, **“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so, you are ...justified when you judge.”** David realized that his real sin was against God. God loved Bathsheba and her husband. He created them. God had a plan for them. But God spit into the face of God. David knew that God was right to punish him.

Finally, David became more positive. David prayed, **“Create in me a pure heart O God...”** David wanted to feel clean, forgiven and hopeful again. Maybe you have that hunger also.

David prayed, **“Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.”** He wanted to hear the Holy Spirit whispering in his thoughts, lifting his spirits. Maybe you know what it feels like when God seems far away and silent. Repentance changes that.

Finally, David prayed **“Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me...”** David wanted to experience joy again, a glad heart, a smile on his face. Guilt destroys our joy. God’s grace restores the joy of our salvation.

In your prayers you might use one of David’s prayer requests or all of them. Here’s more good news. All our sins that we confess in Jesus’ name, God forgives them and forgets them.

David proclaims, **“My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.”**

Simply said, here’s the secret of repentance. **“Rend your heart, not your garments.”** Give it a try. God bless you. Amen.

