



ABOUT THE PROPER

An Explanation of the Variable Parts of the Divine Service



First Day of Lent Ash Wednesday

March 5, 2025



Open Door Policies
God's Surprising Strategies for Getting Sinners Back Home
Lowering Our Defenses

Whenever someone accuses us of doing wrong, it's easy to get defensive. We make excuses. "I'm not that bad." We try and balance the scales. "Okay, that was wrong. But look at all the good I do!" We play the comparison game. "At least I'm not like him!" With our defenses go up, repentance is impossible. God, however, has a strategy for lowering our defenses. He assures us that his door is open, and that his home is the place we don't need to pretend to be something that we're not—perfect. Our Father does not ask us to come to him and confess our sin so that he might know what we've done. *He* already knows. He asks us to repent so that *we* might fully know what we've done. Only when we grasp the true weight of our sin, will we call to God for mercy. When we do, God is always quick to forgive.

First Reading² 2 Samuel 12:1-13

One of the devil's favorite temptations for us in Lent is the temptation to make comparisons that leave us looking less needy, less desperate, less deserving of God's wrath and punishment. Then the confession of sins in private prayers and in the liturgy becomes mere rote, mere empty ritual. Of all the points that can be made in this lesson, the one that sticks out on Ash Wednesday is the ease with which David condemned his own sins in someone else. Lent is not the time for looking from side to side to find others guilty of our sins whom we condemn in order to throw off anyone's suspicion of us. Lent is not the time to look from side to side at all! It is the time to come silently and alone to look down deep inside, and then to despair. It is the time to come silently and alone to look up at the cross and see there and there alone my salvation. It is time to confess with David, "I have sinned against the LORD!" The punishment for that sin Christ will bear in Lent. Chastisement we can expect to bear, the chief but not the only purpose of which will be to bring us to the cross of Christ to find there alone our salvation.

Second Reading² 2 Corinthians 5:20b - 6:2

Look on in wonder and in awe! These are the most holy days of the year, the only really important days in the history of the world, in your history. For what you are, God in Christ becomes! What he is you become! Nothing else matters in time or eternity. Therefore, Lent is serious in its urging and pleading from the heart of God and from the altar of sacrifice, the cross. Do not receive the grace of God in vain! It is meant for sinners, therefore just for you! It is meant for today, therefore just for you!

Gospel² Luke 18:9-14

There are really only two people in church on Ash Wednesday. One is quite comfortable and pleased with himself. The Pharisee is indeed a fine fellow. Would that we had more people in the church and in the world who lived as he lived. He has made good use of God's blessings. And as far as he is concerned, that proves that he deserved them. So there is no anguish over sin, no recognition of the despair which should always be ours when we look at ourselves. There is sense of his desperate need for grace and pardon that covers everything that we are and have and do—especially our good works, when we imagine that they prove our worthiness. Only confessing sinners are open to that point. The publican was really being honest; he was indeed a wretch, deserving of nothing. He was by definition and occupation: *sinner*. That's who Lent is for, *sinners*. If you don't come to Lent as a sinner, you will miss its whole point and go down to your house with the Pharisee, worse off than you were when you came.

Psalm of the Day⁴

Psalm 51

The Church sings Psalm 51 in services that emphasize repentance, both contrition and faith. It is classified as the middle of the seven penitential psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) and is the first of the biographical psalms of David (51-60). Martin Luther said, “Psalm 51 is one of the most prominent teaching psalms. David teaches us correctly what sin is, where it comes from, what damage it does, and how a person becomes free from it. In this psalm, like nowhere else, sin is clearly shown to be an inheritance, born in us. No works can remove it; only God’s grace and forgiveness can do that.”

Gospel Acclamation

Joel 2:13

“Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.” In repentance, the Holy Spirit moves us to flee from sin and the devil and turn back to God, our gracious Lord. In his grace (undeserved love), mercy (compassion), patience (“slow to anger”), and steadfast love (enduring and unflinching care for us), he grants forgiveness.

Prayer of the Day

Almighty and merciful God, you never despise what you have made and always forgive those who turn to you. Create in us such new and contrite hearts that we may truly repent of our sins and obtain your full and gracious pardon; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Hymn of the Day

654 “Jesus Sinners Does Receive” (Erdmann Neumeister, 1671-1756)

Church Year Season²

Lent

The season of Lent leads the Church on a forty-day journey of repentance and prayer, of remembrance and renewal of our baptism. God calls to mankind: Return to the Lord! The journey begins with Ash Wednesday’s warning of mortality and culminates at the Service of Holy Baptism in the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday.

The Church’s Lenten worship is muted and quiet. For centuries, the Church has omitted her most jubilant songs of praise during this season of repentance (e.g. the “Gloria in Excelsis,” and the use of the word “Alleluia”) to reflect the somber nature of the season. Note, however, that the Sundays are designated as Sunday in Lent, not Sundays of Lent. The Sundays themselves are not considered part of the forty days, but are islands of refreshment in our Lenten walk.

Colors & Symbolism

Black

Black is the absence of color. It symbolizes mourning, sin, death – especially Jesus’ death on the cross wherein he suffered the wrath of God against sin for all mankind.

Traditions & Customs

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Lenten season. The name for the festival comes from the medieval custom of believers coming to church on this day in sackcloth and throwing ashes over their heads – an expression of repentance. These ashes were made from the burnt palms on the previous year’s Palm Sunday mixed with oil.

Some Christians have followed the custom of rubbing ashes on their foreheads in the shape of a cross. This ceremony called ‘the imposition of ashes’ reminds believers of God’s Law: “Remember, O man, that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” After this, the Gospel is individualized at the Lord’s Supper with the words, “Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”

Nain Paraments

Good Friday

Lectern & Pulpit antependia: The Cross is the most recognizable symbol for Jesus, his Church, his sacrificial death, and his victory over sin and death. The apostle St. Paul used the image of the cross as a way to sum up the Gospel of God’s saving work through Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:18; Galatians 6:14). On the cross, God’s Son suffered and died to pay for the sins of the world. By God’s grace and through faith, we are cleansed by Christ’s blood (Hebrews 10:10).

¹ Courtesy of “Planning Christian Worship: Year A”. Jonathan E. Schroeder, Author.

² Courtesy of “Planning Christian Worship: Year B”. Daniel M. Deutschlander, Author.

³ Courtesy of “Planning Christian Worship: Year C”. Joel J. Gawrisch, Author.

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