

Ash Wednesday
St. Matthew 6:1-21; Jonah 3:1-10

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

What is Lent? This season we are entering is a time when, as the Maundy Thursday liturgy reminds you, our Lord calls us to “intensify our struggle against sin, death, and the devil.” Easier said than done, for the harder you work at this, the bigger your failure will be. What can you do to struggle against sin, death, and the devil?

The struggle against the devil is a done deal. Oh, he still prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (cf. 1 Peter 5:8), but he’s a conquered lion. He will bite at you, perhaps take a small bit of flesh and injure you, but he’s a lion with dull or no teeth. His head is crushed, he has no dominion over you. Therefore, your struggle against the devil is this: Jesus has conquered him and given you the victory. Scowl fierce as he will, he can harm you none; one little word fells him: It is finished!

The struggle against death is also a done deal. Death is a conquered enemy now in service to God as the gateway to life eternal. To struggle against it is a futile struggle; should Jesus not return in your lifetime, death will get the better of you—you will take your last breath and be laid in your grave. Remember, “All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust,” (Ecclesiastes 3:20) “For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19c) However, there is still a struggle against death for you. This intensified struggle against death is exemplified in constantly being reminded of your baptism. There, at the font, you were drowned, joined to the death of Jesus, which is your death to sin, only to be brought forth from those waters a new creation, created in Christ Jesus for eternal life. So, how do you struggle against death? By being reminded that you are alive in Christ through Holy Baptism.

The struggle against sin, though, is different. Why are you dust that will return to dust? What did you have to die with Christ in order to live with Him? Because you are a sinner. And for as long as you remain on this side of eternity, you will continue to struggle with sin. That’s what Lent is; an intensified struggle against your sin.

What you do, however, is no different than what you have been doing. You are being called to repentance, as happens every Sunday in this place. Perhaps it happens more often as you gather here to receive your Lord on Wednesday evenings, too. So, you repent. And you repent. You confess your sinfulness. You confess your sins. You confess your struggle against the Word of God and against your wicked flesh.

This call to repentance is what you heard from the king of Nineveh:

Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?”

“Let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands,” the king decreed. Repent, he said, because God may yet turn from his anger. Who knows what god or gods the Ninevites worshiped; it was the capital of Assyria, so it’s likely they worshiped Assyrian gods, such as Baal and Asherah and a host of others, among which might have been YHWH, added as just another god among many to them. In comes Jonah, prophet of YHWH, who “cries out against” Nineveh for the wickedness that has come before YHWH. (cf. Jonah 1:2) And the king and people repented.

So, what is repentance? Your confession as part of this congregation is this, concerning

repentance: “[R]epentance consists properly of these two parts: One is contrition, that is, terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin; the other is faith, which is born of the Gospel, or of absolution, and believes that for Christ’s sake, sins are forgiven, comforts the conscience, and delivers it from terrors. Then good works are bound to follow, which are the fruits of repentance.” (ACXII, 2b-6, Triglotta) Repentance consists of two parts, contrition and faith. You must have faith in order to repent, and by that faith, you see and know your sin and are terrified because of it. This faith is born of the Gospel, which means that it is given to you, and it is a faith that believes that for Christ’s sake, sins are forgiven. Therefore, repentance is terror and comfort, and from it springs confession, to which then is spoken absolution, to remind you and give you the forgiveness wrought for you on the cross by Christ, soothing and comforting your terrified conscience.

From this repentance, from this Gospel, springs forth good works. Which are these works? They are, among others, those things which you heard in this evening’s Gospel: alms-giving, prayer, and fasting. These, also then, are means by which your struggle against sin is intensified during Lent.

Perhaps during the rest of the year, you fast only when you have to, when it is required of you for some medical procedure or some such reason. Rarely, if ever, though, I imagine you take up the practice of fasting as a discipline against sin. During Lent, though, you might more seriously consider the practice, as you “give something up” for the season. Perhaps this giving something up for Lent is a regular thing for you, but have you ever stopped to wonder why you do so? Most simply, it is a good work which you have the opportunity to participate in as a struggle against your sin. By fasting, you are reminding yourself that God is the giver of all that is good, and you have nothing that you have by your own power.

Perhaps during the rest of the year, you pray at regular and ordinary times, such as before and after meals, before going to bed, and when you wake up in the morning. These are fine times to pray, and if you are looking to add this as a part of your regular routine, Dr. Luther has included these prayers in his Small Catechism, and you most especially have the Lord’s Prayer as given in this evening’s Gospel. During Lent, though, you might more seriously consider not when you pray or for how long, but what it is you say when you pray. So, you might consider slowing down as you pray and ponder each word and phrase, especially of those given to you by Jesus Himself, giving more sway to the Word and less to your own thoughts and concerns. By praying, you are doing a good work as God has bid you to pray and even given you the words with which to pray, and in those times that you are engaged in prayer, you intensify your struggle against sin, giving it less of a chance to grab a hold of you.

Perhaps during the rest of the year, you do charitable deeds every so often. Maybe it is once a month, when you put a little extra money in the offering plate designated for the mission of the month. Outside of that, your charity is reserved for yourself; after all, you do have to take care of yourself, too. That’s no complaint, but more of an indictment against these times of economic struggle. During Lent, though, you might more seriously consider doing more or giving more to a specific cause. Why would you consider alms-giving or an increase in giving alms? Like fasting, it is a reminder that everything you have is from the hand of God and that much of what He gives you is given to you in order to help and serve your neighbor. And, in so doing, it is an aid in your intensifying struggle against sin.

But, Lent can also be a dangerous time. For, as the opportunity for increased good works is given to you, your Old Man seizes upon it as a time to increase your sin. You heard Jesus’ words of exhortation against this. “[W]hen you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men.” “[W]hen you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” “[W]hen you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting.” When you do the good works that you have been given to do, don’t draw attention to yourself in doing them. Do them discretely. If you’re found out, don’t make a big deal about it.

Here's the danger you find yourself in. When you give something up and fast, when you intensify your practice of prayer, when you more seriously consider your alms-giving, you are tempted to tell everyone the great things that you are doing. As a brother-in-office put it: "The reason for this [danger] though has to do with competition, that is, it has to do with being able to out fast someone who is fasting, to out pray someone you know who is praying during Lent, to out self-deny someone else-and to announce it, to out give, and to out church others that you might know." This is true, not only during Lent, but for all of the good works you may do throughout the year. When you boast in doing good, you have turned that which would have been a good work into a merit badge of sin against God.

Why does the next person need to know what you've given up for Lent, or that you've given anything up at all? Why does the next person need to know that you're praying more often? Why does the next person need to know that you've increased your giving and charitable deeds? The truth of the matter is that they don't, and the only reason you tell them is to prove to them and to yourself how good you are and how much better than them you are. You're sticking your thumb into the pie to pull out the biggest plum to show off, thump your chest, and tell everyone, "What a good boy am I!"

Repent! I will repeat what the king of Nineveh said. Let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. No extra fasting, prayer, or alms-giving is being asked. Simply this: repent. Your boasting serves nothing more than to be evil; it is violence in your hands and mouth. It harms your neighbor more than the fasting, praying, and especially alms-giving would help. Let that be the terror to your conscience. You already have the faith to trust that Jesus' death and resurrection has covered it.

You are forgiven. This is the message that the gospel brings to your troubled conscience. Yes, even your boasting—the harming of your neighbor—is covered by Jesus' blood. Jesus had died your death and given you the remission of your sins. You are baptized, you are washed, you are sanctified. You belong to Christ who has won you back from death to life, purchased and redeemed you with His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death. The victory is won—sin, death, and the devil are conquered for you. You are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.