

We have a beautiful thing in our liturgical tradition: the church year that allows us to participate in the story of God's saving grace

- from the prophetic expectation of the Messiah to the birth and baptism of Jesus, the Son of God the Father.
- From the public ministry of Jesus to his betrayal and suffering at the hands of the religious and governing authorities.
- From his institution of the Eucharist and his crucifixion to his resurrection and ascension.
- From his pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the church to the spread of the Gospel throughout the world –
- and finally to the promise of his coming to reign in glory.

What happens when we worship is not a mere recitation or blowing off the dust of old history books shelved for centuries,

No – the story is real and happening in real time, in our time, in our lives.

As we worship, we participate in the give and take of God's loving mercy –

Humbling ourselves as sinners before our Lord

Receiving mercy from the hands of our dear Savior Jesus

Praising him with rejoicing and dancing and loud shouts of thanksgiving.

Accepting Jesus' invitation to sit at table with him to share the life he gives us from beyond the grave.

It is the God of all these events – the Creator of the story

– who makes us the people of the story

– the people God loves,

- calls,
- leads,
- provides for,
- judges,
- forgives, and sends out.

The Church year is a beautiful thing because it keeps us in relationship with God alongside Jesus, reminding us who God is and who we are and why it matters.

But sometimes we allow the beauty of this annual cycle to become faded and tarnished in our hearts, treating it as little more than another rerun of the same old thing.

Pastors are especially prone to this hardened attitude.

But our worship is no more a rerun than 20 letters from a loved one ending with the same words: I love you lots!

Each one of those letters reinforces the relationship anew;

cements the love in the heart of the beloved;

and refreshes the affection of one for the other.

Each “I love you” creates a new urgency to be together and to join hearts as one.

Our liturgical cycle is dynamic in the same way

– **God is writing us into the love story begun at creation and made perfect in Jesus.**

That is good news!

But all is not well in paradise, is it.

God's love story with his people has the contours of a rocky relationship

—

- bliss and blunder;
- joy and sorrow;
- harmony and discord;
- union and divorce.

We might be satisfied with being apart from someone

— there is a sense of freedom in divorce — you can live without the demands and expectations of a spouse.

But being apart from God is a false freedom

— for truly, when it comes to our relationship with God

— such freedom leads only to death.

So when our relationship with God is broken

— as it is by our willful rebellion against the commandments

Or our insistence on living on our own terms,

Or even simple apathy and neglect

Then the separation is a matter of life or death — our life or death.

And God wants urgently for us to be reconciled and again share his love.

But that only happens when we are startled out of our complacency by the holy God's confrontation of our sin.

This is the urgency we hear from the prophet Joel –

The day of the Lord is God's judgment against all that opposes his love for us.

Left to our sinful selves, we would be destroyed on that day.

Our mortality would have the last word.

On that day, we would get the death we deserve because of our betrayal of God's love for us

and seeking of self-worth in other relationships

- with material things
- Money
- Beauty
- Status
- Or more fatally, alcohol, drugs, sex, or porn

It is this truth of our broken relationship with God

– this looming mortality

– that God exposes in us today, Ash Wednesday.

Remember that you are dust . . . and to dust you shall return.

These words – and the sign of the cross in ash on our forehead
– are not the final divorce decree,

but rather the beginning of the slow, painful journey toward
reconciliation with God.

Today, as we come before God confessing our sin, **we acknowledge
that it is precisely our sinful selves that God loves so deeply.**

So much does God love us, that he reveals himself in Jesus,
whose suffering, death, and resurrection **is the expression of
God's patient grace and mercy toward us.**

The Lenten pilgrimage is away from the brink of death because of our
sins

through the wilderness with prayer and fasting, sacrifice and hope
**and into the fullness of divine love demonstrated by
Jesus' death on the cross.**

Tonight, though, at the beginning of this journey,

**we linger on the urgent need to fall down repentantly and
humbly before the Lord,**

Courageously looking into the mirror of our sinful souls
**and then turning around to look into the face of our Lord
Jesus on the cross – hanging there for you and for me.**

Let us do it quickly – for we do not know the day or the hour of
our Lord's coming.

Whether the last time you looked in the mirror of your soul and laid it bare before the Lord was yesterday, decades ago, or never, hear what God says to you:

Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning.

It is our supreme Lover who has made a way for us to come back from the brink of death and into the arms of our Savior, through the cross and resurrection.

Let us not delay in turning from our sins and returning to the Lord our God in hope and confidence in God's steadfast love.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen