

READINGS FOR ASH WEDNESDAY

FIRST READING: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Because of the coming Day of the LORD, the prophet Joel calls the people to a community lament. The repentant community reminds God of his gracious character and asks God to spare the people, lest the nations doubt God's power to save.

¹ Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—
² a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
 a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
 nor will be again after them
 in ages to come.

¹² Yet even now, says the LORD,
 return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
 ¹³ rend your hearts and not your clothing.

Return to the LORD, your God,
 for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
 and relents from punishing.

¹⁴ Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
 and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
 for the LORD, your God?

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
 ¹⁶ gather the people.

Sanctify the congregation;
 assemble the aged;
gather the children,
 even infants at the breast.

Let the bridegroom leave his room,
 and the bride her canopy.

¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar
 let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.
Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD,
 and do not make your heritage a mockery,

a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
‘Where is their God?’ ”

PSALM: Psalm 51:1-17

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. (Ps. 51:1)

- ¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.
- ² **Wash me through and through from my wickedness,
and cleanse me from my sin.**
- ³ For I know my offenses,
and my sin is ever before me.
- ⁴ **Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are justified when you speak and right in your judgment.**
- ⁵ Indeed, I was born steeped in wickedness,
a sinner from my mother’s womb.
- ⁶ **Indeed, you delight in truth deep within me,
and would have me know wisdom deep within.**
- ⁷ Remove my sins with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be purer than snow.
- ⁸ **Let me hear joy and gladness;
that the body you have broken may rejoice.**
- ⁹ Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my wickedness.
- ¹⁰ **Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.**
- ¹¹ Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
- ¹² **Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.**
- ¹³ Let me teach your ways to offenders,
and sinners shall be restored to you.
- ¹⁴ **Rescue me from bloodshed, O God of my salvation,
and my tongue shall sing of your righteousness.**
- ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.
- ¹⁶ **For you take no delight in sacrifice, or I would give it.
You are not pleased with burnt offering.**
- ¹⁷ The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit;
a troubled and broken heart, O God, you will not despise.

SECOND READING: 2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10

The ministry of the gospel endures many challenges and hardships. Through this ministry, God’s reconciling activity in the death of Christ reaches into the depths of our lives to bring us into a right relationship with God. In this way, God accepts us into the reality of divine salvation.

^{20b} We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

^{6:1} As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ² For he says,

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ³ We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷ truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

GOSPEL: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commends almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, but emphasizes that spiritual devotion must not be done for show.

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹ “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁶ “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁹ “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”