

Ash Wednesday – 2022
Joel 2:12-19
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

The picture on the front of the bulletin is provocative. It is an ancient woodcut by Lucas Cranach, crafted in 1523. Cranach was a Reformation era artist who was a very close friend of Luther's. Cranach was a Lutheran, a brilliant theologian in his own right, and capable of depicting deep theological truths in a single brush stroke. The picture is not difficult to figure out. "Cranach is not attempting to say that Satan is a woman, but that the evil one chose a 'pleasing form' in which to appear to Eve" (Logia, Epiphany 2000). It is artistic conjecture but it is quite interesting. To be sure, the serpent of hell wants Eve disarmed. To be sure, the deceiver wants to create a pleasant atmosphere in which to sow his lies. To be sure, the devil is cruel, manipulative, and cunning. What could be more disarming than Satan appearing as a mirror image of Eve? She would readily identify with Satan and his task is half accomplished. Lead her away from God. Lead her away from God's word. Lead her to embrace herself.

Are women vulnerable to Satan's craft in our contemporary era? Absolutely. Are only women vulnerable to this rather obvious tactic of the devil. Most certainly not! Male or female, Satan wants to get his hooks in us. "[T]he day you eat thereof you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). So said the Creator about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It was indisputable. The simple fact that God's Word is indisputable doesn't rein in lust, doesn't rein in greed, doesn't rein in pride. Eve heard the lie and inwardly digested it: "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5). "She took its fruit and ate" (Genesis 3:6). God's response to her carnal independence is a blistering word of judgment: "What is this that you have done?" (Genesis 3:13). What the Lord says at the end of this episode has been put in your ears tonight: "...[you will] return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19).

Sin is departure from God. Sin is active rebellion against life, against truth, against what is holy. Sin is death. Sin is a wretched calamity that you have welcomed into your heart, your home, your soul. Sin is an infection that cannot be kept in an isolated area. Sin does not quarantine itself politely to the place where you invite it in – it spreads violently, it spreads like a cancer. Your sin hurts people. Your sin damages the things God loves. Do you not know? Have you not heard? The wages of sin is death? (Romans 6:23). You are a Christian. The act of repentance is part of Christianity, a vital part of our faith. It is vital because God is at work to restore you, to bring you back to Himself. "Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments" (Joel 2:12). Your whole heart; God is not interested in fakery. God is not interested in spiritual theater. A lukewarm repentance, partial and calculating, will do you great damage. Are you prepared to renounce a lukewarm repentance?

We justify our sin in a multitude of ways. Here's just one: When someone confronts us with our ill behavior we offer an excuse, a rationale for why we did this thing and then we spit these words: "I'm not perfect, you know." What is behind those words? What's behind those words is

a preemptive excuse for not changing. What's behind those words is a faithless refusal to repent. Imperfect beings can go on sinning and chalk it up to being imperfect – it's a seamless argument for a sinner who has no intention of repenting. It certainly is less caustic than "I enjoy my sin and don't you dare try to change me," but it's pretty much the same thing. I'm not perfect, you know. Well, yes, I did know. You and me and the world over are imperfect, but how does that change the fact that you are a Christian and what you are doing is wrong?

St. Paul wrote this: "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened" (1 Corinthians 5:6-7). The old leaven is sin of every variety. In the OT, at critical junctures in their liturgical life, the Israelites were to rid their bread and their homes of yeast. Do you think that God was overconcerned about what went into their belly or was He teaching them something just a bit more significant, something deeper – and us too? "Leaven was a symbol for sin. Abstaining from it depicted the new life, cleansed from the sinful nature" (Lutheran Study Bible – Exodus 12:15). Those who ignored this direction from God were to be "cut off from Israel" (Exodus 12:15). Zeal for the things of God, zeal for purity would move these faithful Israelites to pry into mouseholes, *by candlelight*, to ensure that their homes were swept clean from any residual yeast. That is the vibrant life of faith that you are called to.

Is it within your ability to discern when Satan comes whispering some rank lie, some empty way of life? Do you believe that he uses his avatars to deceive you, uses someone you may relate to, some glamorous but vapid women, some hyper-intellectual man who is clearly faithless but is masculine, famous, celebrated by the culture? How much of your sinful-self have you grown comfortable embracing? Purge out the old leaven! Repent. "Return to me with your *whole* heart" declares the Lord.

What's to stop you from dying as an unbeliever? One of the saddest parts of being a pastor is seeing people leave the church – not those who move or go elsewhere, but those who go nowhere. Unrepentant, the leaven of self can leaven the whole lump until there is nothing but self left. What will keep us from spiritual emptiness?

Good Friday, at the end of Lent, is the commemoration of the death and burial of Jesus Christ. Ash Wednesday, at the beginning of Lent, is the commemoration of our death, our burial. The two are inextricably intertwined. Jesus the crucified is the new life which God has caused to invade your being. Jesus the crucified is the Way of our return to God, our return to Paradise. You will die. In sin did your mother conceive you. Remember, O man, that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return. But God has remedied death. God took your form; not to deceive you but to vanquish death. The Son of God was made like you in every way, yet He was without sin. The Lord Christ was made man for you. For you, He sacrificed Himself. The leaven of sin invaded His body and He was cut off from the land of the living. Jesus has freed you from death and called you into His kingdom. Life replaces death. Heaven replaces this broken creation. Divine truth replaces hell's deceit. Light eradicates darkness. Substance fills what is hollow. That's what repentance is; that's what being a Christian is – He was and is perfect and He gives Himself to you.

Jesus said this: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). What God demands; God provides. Jesus is your perfect Savior. He loved God above all things and He loves you as Himself. He was faithful in the face of temptation. He denied Himself, He picked up His cross and He gave up His life. “Father, glorify you name” (John 12:28). The mark on your brow is more precious than gold. Christ the Crucified is the strength of the universe and you bear His mark. Christ and His Word is the only thing that keeps you from dying as an unbeliever and He will never leave us. The risen Christ is our unleavened lump and we eat His holy body; we drink His redemptive blood. In Christ you are perfect. His death has transformed death. What Satan designed to be cruel, God has turned into our return home. “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen” (Revelation 7:12).