

In our Old Testament lesson today, the Prophet Joel writes, "Spare Your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"

Jesus is here at His holy altar, according to His promise of forgiveness, life and eternal salvation in heaven. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. Jesus is here for us in His Body broken and His Blood out-poured, put everything that is broken and hurting back together again, for us, for the forgiveness of our sins, for our restoration, for our peace, for our unity with Him and each other; that together we would be one flesh, in a loving and perfect relationship forever, that we would love God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves.

Why should the people, the nations, the non-believers, say of us, "Where is their God?" The Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost is here, as He has always been, in His Holy Word and Sacraments. He is here in preaching and teaching, in Baptism, in Absolution, in Supper. Even when we fail Him He is right here. When we betray Him, when we chose to worship the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh He is still here. The Holy Trinity did not fail us. He alone is steadfast and faithful, He does not change. God is in this place.

Why then should they say of us, "Where is their God?" They might say it because we have lived as if He is not here, as though God could not see how bad we are, or had no power to intervene in our lives and take care of us, or did not really care about the commandments He gave us. We have lived as if we did not fear God's wrath or punishment, but feared only the ill opinions of men, lived only for ourselves, worshiped ourselves, told ourselves we deserved it, been selfish, greedy, lustful, petty, mean, proud. That is why we've gossiped and bragged, lied to our neighbor and ourselves, pretended that we didn't mean it when we got caught, hated people,

wished they would get hurt, thought ourselves superior, harder working, busier, more clever, more kind and considerate, more fair, and, of course, filled with more common sense. Perhaps they look at us and ask, "Where is their God?" because we have denied Him, been ashamed of Him, lived as though God were not here, or were not real, or did not care.

For this we mourn, we weep, we consecrate a fast for 40 days. We mark ourselves with ashes. We do not tear our garments but our hearts, desiring that God would create in us a clean heart, that He would not banish us from His presence. We have failed and treated God's Holy Name and Word with disregard. We are sorry, deeply, deeply sorry. We do not want to sin anymore. We do not want to hurt our neighbors and our friends and our families. We do not want to hurt ourselves. We do not want to bring shame to God's Name or to hinder our neighbor's reputation. We want to do better. We repent. That is what the Baptismal life is about.

Because this is so our Lenten prayer is, "Spare Your people, O Lord." For if He does not, we are lost, all hope is lost. Place your fear, love and trust in God above all things. Do not doubt that Jesus is here. He demonstrates His charity and goodness toward us. He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love toward us. That is where our strength is to be found.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, during the season of Lent we are going to focus upon the threefold theme: Witness, Mercy, Life Together. The president of Synod, the Reverend Matthew Harrison, has placed these three themes before us for our prayerful meditation.

WITNESS: before God and to the world. This is the fundamental gift and task of the baptized child of God, to bear witness to Jesus Christ and His death, resurrection, ascension into heaven and promise to come again to bring you to where He is with all the saints and angels at the right hand of the Father. Libbie, Taylor, Sadie, this is what you have been taught these past four years of catechism instruction, this is what you will promise on the day you are confirmed: to

continue steadfast in this confession and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it. Bearing witness to Jesus, this is our responsibility toward each other. This is our sacred task toward those who do not know Jesus or reject Him.

MERCY: Regarded by God...for Others. From our youth we have been taught, "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not our doing; it is the gift of God." With these words we realize that God loves the whole world because of the body and blood given and shed for us on the cross by His only Son, Jesus Christ. We are forgiven, we are restored to the image of God, we are loved because of Jesus. In Christ we are valuable. And because this is so, we are free to regard those around us, our neighbors, in the same way; they are valuable, they need to realize God's love for them through us. We need to recognize, to value, to listen to, to forgive, to have compassion upon, to speak up for and defend, to act in mercy toward our neighbor, loving them as God loves them and we love ourselves.

LIFE TOGETHER: Living together, as Baptized Children of God in a congregation is just as hard as living in a family, at times it is mass chaos and arguments and disorder. We realize that we have been joined together as the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints, in the unity that Jesus has so freely and generously given us in His blessed Gospel of grace alone by faith alone in the cross of Christ alone. To a visitor it appears dysfunctional at best. But thanks be to God we have the message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. We have the Word of God in all its truth and purity. We have Baptism, Absolution and Supper, which strengthen and keep us, forgiving us, building us up in the one true faith, recreating us perfect in God's image. The saying goes in a family, "blood is thicker than water" but in the church it is the blood and water and Word of Jesus which hold us together, that the devil, the world and our sinful flesh would have no power over us.

On this Ash Wednesday and during these 40 days of Lent, may this three-fold theme help us to humble ourselves before God and neighbor. May we always fix our eyes on Jesus and His cross. Pray that we are always kept in the Holy Church, kept in Jesus' Word, kept in the One True Faith, kept in the Blessed Communion of Christ. Pray that our children, our grandchildren, our friends and neighbors, our enemies and those who have hurt us would also be with us. Give thanks that God our heavenly Father has gathered us from the ends of the earth to be in this place, before His altar. Why should the people say of us, "Where is their God," when we know that Jesus is here on His Altar in His risen Body and Blood, our God, who died but who now lives and reigns, for us, for you, for me, for all people. Jesus will join us together in a few minutes to eat together in a beautiful banquet that He has prepared for us. We are joined together; in Him we are one flesh, one body, one church. He is what holds us together. Give thanks that you and I are here with Jesus and that He will never leave us or forsake us. In Jesus name. Amen.