

“Liberator From Darkness”

Isaiah 42:1-9

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we begin this penitential Lententide with the solemn reminder of our sinful state, we continue our series of Isaiah’s Messianic prophecies that we began during Advent. On this Ash Wednesday, we are reminded of the darkness that seeks to maintain a hold on us—original sin. Adam’s sin is our sin, and we carry it with us at all times. The sinful flesh is the source of the darkness from which we need liberation from our Lord. And it is for that reason we must return to dust, but we do not return to dust without hope. While we walk this world of darkness, there is yet light that shines through, and it shines through as our Liberator from darkness, Jesus Christ, begins His journey to Jerusalem and the cross.

Darkness is nothing. It has no characteristics of its own—that is, darkness is nothing more than the absence of light. In order to overcome darkness, light must shine forth in the void that surrounds you. Sure, you can wander around grasping at the emptiness and hoping you might find a way out, but without light to guide your way, you will just move from one darkness into another. Light is the only thing that can liberate you in that instance. Without it, the darkness will keep its hold on you, paralyzing you in fear as you wish you could just get away from it.

Sin loves the dark. It thrives when it is shielded from the light and kept in the dark reaches of your mind instead of out in the open. No one is capable of being perfect keepers of the Law, and no one wants their pet sins to be known. We, rightly, are ashamed of them, and just want them to stay hidden in the darkness that allows them to dwell securely. We have no ability to keep ourselves from sinning. And that is because of the sin which these crosses remind us of this evening. Our total depravity because of the sin we all inherit from Adam is never on a break. It is something we carry with us everywhere we go, and in everything we do. We are indeed sinful people, and if left to our own devices, we would do nothing but seek to sin more and more.

Certainly, I don’t think anyone would rather keep their sin over expelling it from their conscience. We all seek to rid ourselves of sin, but we just can’t, no matter how hard we try. And sometimes there are some that just eat at us over and over again, and just won’t let us have any peace. Satan is exceptionally good at using those sins and those moments of helplessness to his advantage. He knows that when we are despairing of ourselves, we are looking inwardly, and not to the one who has the power to rid us of

our guilt and shame. He surrounds us with things that keep us in the dark, wandering to and fro with seemingly no hope of getting out of it.

Because of the darkness of our sin, we are destined to return to dust. From dust we were made, as the Lord gave life to Adam, and to dust we will return because of his sin, and the guilt we bear because of it. The same is not said of our state in darkness. We were not created in darkness and so destined to return to darkness. We are saved from darkness, liberated from the sin which would keep us there. There should be no despair in the face of sin. We absolutely should feel sorrow for our sins, but never in such a way that we lose sight of the light which leads us out of the prison it has built around us.

In those moments, we are not called to despair or retreat within ourselves to find the answer. When sin grabs hold of us and the evil one blinds us from the light and keeps us in darkness, we are called to repent, and remember that Christ has forgiven our sin, and paid its penalty on our behalf. The devil can't stand up to the light of the Liberator. No matter how hard he tries to keep us in his deep, dark dungeon, Jesus is greater than his bonds. Our sins no longer hold sway over us as those who are in the faith. The original sin of Adam no longer holds sway over us as those who have been baptized into the death of Christ.

That is why we make the mark of the cross upon our foreheads this evening. It is so much more than a solemn reminder of the sin of Adam which brought death into the world, and thus causes our return to dust. It is upon our heads to remind us of the water which washes away the filth of that sin. It is a baptismal reminder to daily drown the Old Adam in the remembrance of our baptisms through confession and absolution, as we bring those sins which would otherwise drown us into the light and out of the dark. And there is no way we can do that of our own will. If we are to truly know what it means to be freed from the bondage of sin, we must first have faith in the ransom which our great Liberator has gone to His death in order to pay.

And He has done just that. He has gone to the cross in order to take every one of those sins that are kept in the dark upon His own shoulders. He has carried the weight of that sin as He brings the prisoners out of the prison house and shines as the light to the nations. Something that is seemingly dark and despairing is the source of our greatest joy. The sinful flesh is the source of darkness in the world, but the sinless flesh of the Son of God is the source of light and salvation. God's wrath was heaped upon His only Son as punishment for our sins, and not His. His holy sacrifice is why we gather together in this place. We come here to receive the free gift of forgiveness which He won for us on that tree through His promised means of Word and Sacraments.

So many in the world do not know, or refuse to know, the truth of what Christ has won on their behalf. Darkness permeates the world in a way that brings despair even to those who know the light. We see the devil's work all around us, but the answer is not retreat into ourselves. The answer is the proclamation of the Gospel, through Law and Gospel preaching, and the right administration of the Sacraments. Spreading the Good News of Jesus is so much more than just standing on a street corner and shouting about Christ as loud as you can. It is availing yourself of His gifts whenever possible so that you would be assured that you are indeed forgiven for Christ's sake. It's living your sanctified life through your vocations as one who is redeemed by the blood of Jesus.

The darkness of this world of sin is nothing more than the absence of the light of the world, Jesus Christ. For those who walk in darkness, the only salvation for them is faith in the one who can liberate them from the sinful life in which they live. As Jesus goes to the cross, He goes "to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness (Is. 42:7)." Those who walk in sin have been given freedom from condemnation, death, and the sin to which they cling. Salvation has been won for all mankind, and by faith that gift has been given to us as those who have been called as God's own dear children. Returning to dust is not the end. The resurrection to everlasting life awaits us, when God will take that dust and perfect it. In those perfect bodies we will dwell in eternal bliss in the light of the One who has liberated us from darkness, vanquished all evil, and given all that we would have everything. Yes, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return," but because of Jesus' sacrifice at Calvary, "You are glorified, and to glory you will go." Amen.