

**Rob Mathis
Ash Wednesday Sermon
2.17.21
Rose Hill Church**

The Great Return

I have chosen Isaiah 61:1-3 as my primary Scriptural reference tonight. It reads as follows from the New American Standard Bible (NASB):

61 The Spirit of the Lord ^[a]God is upon me,

Because the Lord has anointed me

To bring good news to the ^[b]afflicted;

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,

To proclaim liberty to captives

And ^[c]freedom to prisoners;

²To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord

And the day of vengeance of our God;

To comfort all who mourn,

³To grant those who mourn *in Zion*,

Giving them a garland instead of ashes,

The oil of gladness instead of mourning,

The mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting.

So they will be called ^[d]oaks of righteousness,

The planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified.

Let us pray:

I grew up in a military family and we lived all over the US and even overseas. Our family attended church wherever we lived, including base chapels, Presbyterian and Methodist churches. Even so, I do not recall being exposed to Ash Wednesday services, nor of knowing much about the Season of Lent, until well into high school, when some of my Catholic friends showed up to school with ash-smudged crosses on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday.

I appreciate Pastor Brian's very clear explanation of Ash Wednesday and the Lenten Season, for tonight we begin a most important and somber time of preparation, one where we are called to draw near to God in humility, repentance and the renouncing of

both personal and corporate sin within the Body of Christ. This is indeed a very serious time. Sin is serious business. Make no mistake about it. Sin is corrosive, destructive and can eat us alive, literally, physically and spiritually. The Hebrew Prophet Isaiah, writing some 750 years before Christ's birth, says in Chapter 30, verse 15, "For the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, has said, 'In repentance and rest you shall be saved. In quietness and trust is your confidence.' However, God, speaking through His prophet of old, knew the heart of humanity, and thus was added, 'But you would have none of it.'"

We can look at what has been in our lives and in the world; whether in the near past or in the far-off

distance. And we can focus on what we have done. Dwell on it. Ponder it. And if we classify in our own minds that this past was “good and positive”, we may be tempted to stop here. We can say, “enough”. We can say, “I have done my part and now I am going to stare at my wall of fame”, if you will. And do you know this is true? Many of us have walls of fame...awards, recognition, whatever. I met a man who was very famous, still is. He has a room, a room bigger than many people’s entire homes. It is filled from top to bottom and everywhere in between with trophies, awards, plaques, and massive types of recognition plastered all over the walls, in showcases and on and on. These are all accomplishments from

his past. He doesn't garner those anymore. That time is finished for him, yet the memorial is there all the same.

I am not saying any of that is bad, per se. That is not my business. But if we get stuck in our past, whether we say, "Oh my life is good. I have accomplished my goals. I have won the prize. I have made it." Well, we also might just as well say, "But that person over there. They didn't do what I did." Or perhaps we judge them. Devalue them. Hold them in contempt. "They have no awards. They haven't done so well." Or we might even say that of ourselves. We might feel like we personally never measured up. Didn't make the grade. Are not valuable. In fact,

many of us have that kind of wall! A wall of shame! A wall of failed relationships, failed businesses, failed attempts at “being somebody”. Yes, we have those walls too. They are usually not nearly as visible. But these walls are every bit as insidious.

Both of these are merely distractions. The Apostle Paul said, “Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead”. Philippians 3:13

Constantly the Word of God tells us to persevere, to press on, to keep seeking, keep praying, and by all means keep walking out our faith day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute.

For many of us, though, when we hear these words, they ring shallow, perhaps even feel empty. We have become discouraged. Many feel abandoned. Alone. Afraid. Worn quite thin. When someone says, “keep going” we sometimes want to scream out! To say, “I cannot do this anymore!”

And you know, neither can I. Not in my own strength. And we were never intended to figure all this out, get it right, be on top of the heap. That, my friends, is all rubbish. Lies from the pit of hell itself. Noted Bible teacher David Guzik points out that Isaiah 30 is not a passage of condemnation but one of hope. It is a passage where God Himself is sending out His message, very clearly, about what He desires of

His children and of what happens when we turn aside from His love and faithfulness. For it is in our turning toward God and our drawing close to Him that we find rest, not striving; we find quietness in trusting Him not ourselves; we find confidence in His ability within us, not our own.

So, for me, what I see in Ash Wednesday and in the Lenten Season, is a great time of reset. A time to step back, lean into Jesus Christ, and allow Him to, as the Psalmist says in Psalm 139:23-24, “Search me, oh God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

[24](#)See if there is any hurtful way in me,

and lead me in Your everlasting way.”

What do I mean by a RESET?

Think about this; we humans awaken, and by the time we roll out of bed to face the day we are already veering off course. We cannot help but do so, for we are broken. Yes, we are in fact broken to our very core. To the deepest parts of us. Into the very fabric of who we were made to be, down in our DNA!

As such, we veer, we trip, we fall, we break ourselves and we break others. We break relationships. We break promises. We break resolutions we just made weeks ago! So, is that where we leave this brokenness? Just broken...that's all?

Well, yes. Yes it is. For we not only cannot fix ourselves, we cannot fix others. We are in fact hopeless and helpless. Let these dual truths sink in. Let me repeat these two truths: we are desperately hopeless and helpless. Period.

AND: and there is an earth-shattering heart pounding, explosive AND. And this AND is the biggest AND in human history! AND we are loved. And we are treasured. And we have a Creator God who has never given up on His creation! So while we are not able to fix ourselves, nor dig ourselves out of our pits of despair and darkness. God is! And God desires to!

AND. There is that word AND again. And that is the Word for us today. This Ash Wednesday. And for

this season of Lent. This is The Time for us to turn toward God and not away. To bow our knees and our hearts. To surrender who we think we are. To let go of our past mistakes and hurts and brokenness and let go of our present stuckness and sinfulness. Oh, and our so-called success and pride and self-reliance and and and. There is that word AND again. AND without God this AND could be our undoing. The AND of our stubbornness. The AND of our hate for others, and ultimately our own self-loathing. AND all the other muck and mire that humanity has gathered around itself over the millennia. AND; with the Lord Jesus Christ there will always be an AND for His Children.

You see, the Lord God already knows what a mess we each are. He knows, and He took care of it all. Once for all. Don't get me wrong. It takes whatever time we have on this earth to work through all the ANDS in our lives...the messes we have made. The hurts we have caused. The sin we have committed. But the beauty of the God we serve is that this God, our God, loves us with an infinite love. AND the biggest AND of all is this; He is calling each of you, and me, to turn to Him afresh and anew today. He is calling your name...yes, yours. Wherever you sit, wherever you find yourself. Jesus is Himself calling you to trade in your filthy rags for the riches of His Kingdom. He is

saying, “Trade in your ashes for My Heavenly garments.”

In finishing, let me say this; in all of who we are, what we have done, where we find ourselves this day; I believe it is imperative that we look through the lens of what God’s intent is for humanity. The Apostle Peter, taking his words from any of dozens of Old Testament passages, tells us afresh and anew in 1 Peter 2:9; “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

What does that mean for us tonight? I believe it means we say and act and live as though our faith

matters. Like the mighty leader of the Israelites, Joshua; who himself said, “Choose this day whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” That means turning toward God and not away. It means saying, “I surrender all”. “I give up and I give in Lord Jesus.” “Here am I. Take me. Mold me. Shape me. Break me. Make me into who You want me to be.”

His call to us tonight is simple, yet profound:

- **For us to RENOUNCE OUR SIN**
- **For us to REPENT AND TURN AWAY FROM ALL THAT WE KNOW IS WRONG**
- **For us to RELINQUISH our whole lives to Jesus**

- **And in so doing we walk day by day in HIS GREAT RESET; His transformation and regeneration, by His Grace and by the Power of the Holy Spirit**

And that, my friends, is our highest paramount duty and calling; to live into His calling of us to be His precious living possession forever. You see, we were created in the image of our Heavenly Father and purposed from before time began to be the beloved bride of Jesus Christ, the One Who cherishes us forever and ever. Amen.