

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Ash Wednesday  
February 18, 2026  
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl  
**Return to me.**

“In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo.

<sup>2</sup> The LORD was very angry with your forefathers. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, now you are to tell this people that this is what the LORD of Armies says to them.

Return to me, declares the LORD of Armies, and I will return to you, says the LORD of Armies. <sup>4</sup> Do not be like your forefathers, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed, “This is what the LORD of Armies says. Return, return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.”

But our forefathers did not listen, nor did they pay attention to me, declares the LORD. <sup>5</sup> Your forefathers—where are they now? And those prophets—did they go on living indefinitely? <sup>6</sup> But my words and my statutes, which I commanded to my servants the prophets, caught up with our forefathers, didn’t they?

Then they returned and said, “Because of our ways and our deeds, the LORD of Armies has done to us just as he planned to do to us.”

—Zechariah 1:1-6 EHV

It’s humbling and even embarrassing when someone approaches you and tells you that you have sinned. Your words were insensitive. Your actions were defiant. Your thoughts, impure. You convince yourself that it’s no big deal, but it is. It is. Sin separates us from God and each other. So, you stand before two paths. Dismiss what you know deep in your soul or repent. Ignore the sins that will ultimately lead to dust and ashes and death or in dust and ashes, repent.

The apostle Peter reminds us of what God wants. God doesn’t want to cast you aside. God doesn’t want to send you away from his presence. God doesn’t want you to perish. No, Peter writes, **“God is patient for your sakes, not wanting anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance”** (2 Peter 3:9).

And that’s the desire of his children. God’s children, you and I, we do not want to walk away from God. We want to be with God. God has created that desire in your soul. So, the life of a Christian is one of repentance. It’s a changed mind and heart. Instead heading away from God toward dust and ashes and death, God changes us toward forgiveness, life, and salvation.

So, we confess our sins. Martin Luther succinctly reminds us in his small catechism, **“Confession has two parts. The one is that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution or forgiveness from the pastor as from God himself, not doubting but firmly believing that our sins are thus forgiven before God in heaven.”** And what sins should we confess? **“Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer. But before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts.”**

You see, there is war going on for your soul. It’s a war between the devil and God. The devil wants you and me to bury our sins deep in our souls. Ignore them. Justify them. Dismiss them. And that makes sense to our logic. But in the end it leads to death. It eats away at you. It’s as if your bones and your soul slowly die.

God wants something different. He wants to heal you. He wants to forgive you. He wants help you. So, he leads us to repent. He wants us to see our sins taken from us and nailed to a cross. He wants you to see that those sins are no longer your sins, but they are nailed to a cross. He wants us to hear without any doubt, the Son of God cry out, **“It is finished.”**

During our midweek Lent services, we will hear from the prophet Zechariah, son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo. Each week we will look at one of his prophecies to see how he described Jesus’ suffering and death in such vivid detail that he has been called the Passion Prophet, or the Holy Week Prophet.

Today we start at the beginning. And we hear the theme of Zechariah’s message. The theme of the book of the prophet Zechariah is this: **Return to me, declares the LORD of Armies, and I will return to you, says the LORD of Armies.**

Why does God say that? Where had his people gone that they should now return? Zechariah’s prophecies were made around 520 B.C. He was sent by God to the people of Judah who had returned from captivity in Babylon to

the Promised Land. They were back. They were rebuilding their temple. Some 15 years *after* the exiles had returned from captivity, they were living in relative peace and comfort.

So, when God calls them to return, he isn't telling them to return physically. He's telling them to return spiritually. He was calling them to repent and return to him in their hearts.

You see, after they came home, they became so focused on rebuilding their lives, planting their fields, renovating their homes, and restoring their bank accounts that they forgot about the God who had restored them to their land.

So Zechariah, whose name means "**the LORD remembers,**" would help the people remember the Lord. He began by calling them to turn from their evil ways.

**"The LORD was very angry with your forefathers. Do not be like your forefathers, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed, 'This is what the LORD of Armies says. Return, return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.' But our forefathers did not listen, nor did they pay attention to me, declares the LORD."**

The Lord had been very angry; literally, "He raged! He burned with hot anger against your forefathers!" He was tired of his people's repeated rebellion. They heard his warnings but refused to listen when he told them to knock it off.

So, he disciplined them. He took away their nice homes as they saw them burned to the ground. He took away their homeland as they were carried off to Babylon. He took away their freedom as they were enslaved by an enemy nation.

But now the next generation had returned to Judah. And Zechariah holds up their forefathers as a bad example: **"Your forefathers—where are they now? And those prophets—did they go on living indefinitely? <sup>6</sup> But my words and my statutes, which I commanded to my servants the prophets, caught up with our forefathers, didn't they?"**

"Look around," the prophet challenged the people. "What happened to your ancestors when they disobeyed? Everything that God had warned would happen did happen! Will you learn from their history? Or will you repeat their mistakes? And don't think that God's offer of grace will last forever. As a prophet, I won't be around forever to keep warning you if you reject God's grace." That's essentially what Zechariah told the people.

But it's good for us to hear that warning, too. The apostle Paul writes about these forefathers, these ancestors, when he says in 1 Corinthians 10, **"Now these things took place as examples to warn us not to desire evil things the way they did. <sup>7</sup> Do not become idolaters like some of them—as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and got up to celebrate wildly.' <sup>8</sup> And let us not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell. <sup>9</sup> Let us not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and so were being destroyed by the serpents. <sup>10</sup> And do not grumble, as some of them grumbled, and were destroyed by the destroyer. <sup>11</sup> All these things that were happening to them had meaning as examples, and they were written down to warn us, to whom the end of the ages has come."**

So, we ask ourselves: have we learned from the Israelites' mistakes? Or will we repeat them? We too need to be called to turn back to God because we daily sin much. We too get distracted by the cares and concerns of this life, by our jobs and our homes and our bank accounts. We can get so caught up in everyday life that we even forget about God. So, the Lord comes to you today, and he says, **"Return to me, and I will return to you."**

On this Ash Wednesday, we set aside time to reflect: Have I been apathetic toward God's Word? Has my relationship with God grown cold? Am I heeding the Lord's call to repent—to turn away from my sins in sincere sorrow and turn to my patient and forgiving Savior?

That's not easy, is it? Confessing sin is never fun. It's a stark reminder of a reality of death when we fall in the dust and ashes before our God. We have a visible indication of a spiritual reality: **I am dust, and to dust I shall return.** So, we cry out, "Lord, I have sinned. Be merciful to me, a sinner."

And that's when the Lord smiles. He opens his arms and says, **"Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."** Your Father's arms are open to you. When we return to God in repentance, he returns to us with assurance. When we return to him in confession, he returns to us in absolution. When we return to him and seek his favor, he returns to us with the reminder that we have had it all along—for Jesus' sake.

Yes, we may still suffer earthly consequences for our sins, and we must confess with the people of Israel, **"Because of our ways and our deeds, the LORD of Armies has done to us just as he planned to do to us."** But we are spared the eternal punishment that our sins deserve, and we accept his forgiveness with joy.

Then we return to God with our lives. We give them back to him in thanks. We change our minds about what is important in life. Our everyday cares and concerns—our jobs, our homes, our bank accounts—still require attention. Our Father knows that we need these things. So his Son instructs us, **"Seek first the kingdom of God**

**and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).**

No matter how often you have wandered, no matter how far you have run away from God, the Lord’s promise remains: **“Return to me, and I will return to you.”** Amen.