

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Ash Wednesday
February 14, 2024
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
Where does the finger point?

—Job 40:1-2; 42:1-6

You know the power of an accusation. You've done it. You've pointed the accusing finger—sometimes with very good reason. "You didn't do your homework!" "You started the argument!" "You told a lie!" You confront someone you love, you confront them *because* you love them, and you want them to own up to what they've done or failed to do. Exposing sin might start with an accusation. The finger points to someone you love, to help them recognize their sin, repent of it, and receive forgiveness for it.

You also know how powerful and painful it can be to be accused, to have the finger of accusation pointed at you. "*You caused the accident.*" "*You failed to live up to expectations.*" "*You sinned when you spoke and said things that should never come out of a human mouth.*" "*You are guilty. The responsibility falls on you.*" Sometimes the accusation is false; the finger is pointed at you, but you're not guilty. Sometimes the accusation is right-on, and you have to own it. Then there are those accusations and criticisms that aren't delivered to you with a finger pointed in your face. They're accusations about you whispered in the parking lot. They're accusing comments about you posted on social media. Maybe they're even posted anonymously, and you can't even confront your accuser. Maybe they're true. Maybe they're not. No matter which way the finger points, you know the stinging power of an accusation.

Our midweek Lent services this year follow the theme "God on Trial." The Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth, God in the flesh, stood on trial. The fingers were pointed at him, and his enemies vehemently accused him.

For this Ash Wednesday we turn to the powerful Old Testament book of Job. Job was a righteous man, a godly, upstanding man who feared God and shunned evil. He was enormously wealthy: seven sons and three daughters, 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen and 500 donkeys, along with many servants to manage all his wealth. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East. But in a day—in a single day!—he lost it all. His assets, his income, his life savings, his retirement fund—it was all taken from him. And just as the news of this enormous loss reached his ears he received word that all his children had been killed. Job's response? He did not accuse God. He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised." Job's body became covered with painful boils from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. He sat in the ashes and scraped his oozing skin with a piece of broken pottery. His wife told him, "Curse God and die!" But in all this Job did not point a finger at God.

Then Job's friends came to comfort him, but sorry comforters they were. (The term "Job's Comforter" is still used today to describe someone who tries to make you feel better but only makes things worse.) They looked at Job in his wretched, pitiful condition, and they began to accuse him. "Job," they said, "you must have done something to deserve this. You must have sinned somehow that God has afflicted you this way." The relentless finger-pointing goes on for the better part of 38 chapters in Job, until finally Job lashes out. But he didn't just berate his worthless friends, he lashed out and accused God. "God, you're treating me unfairly! God, I'm the victim here! God, just give me a moment in your courtroom, and I'll plead my case. God, you have wronged me!" And now it was Job who was pointing the finger, Job who was doing the accusing, and the finger was pointed at God. And then it's the LORD's time to speak, and God's message to Job is simple and clear: You want your day in court with the Almighty? Brace yourself like a man, Job! I'll ask the questions, and you'll do the answering. Job, who do you think you are?

It sounds so arrogant, so presumptuous for a human being to point the finger at God. But that's exactly what you and I do every time we sin, and we haven't come close to suffering like Job. Every sin that we commit is an attempt to remove God from his throne. "You said this, God, but I'm going to do my own thing. You won't let me have fun, God. You're holding me back, God. You're not being fair, God." When life doesn't go the way we want it, we will accuse God. "You didn't give me that job, God. You took my loved one from me, God. I don't deserve the way you're treating me, God." With every sinful word we accuse God. With every sinful attitude we push God aside and put ourselves first. Every sin is an offense against the infinite holiness of God. Oh yes, you and I have put God on trial, wanted him to take the stand, wanted to grill him and accuse him.

But in our frustration, impatience and anger, when we accuse God we've got it backward. God is God. You are not. The one who rightly calls to account is God. The one who issues the summons to stand in the judgment is God. The one who demands that we answer for our rebellion against him is God. And the question God can ask is not just, "Who do you think you are?" but "Why should I not destroy you? For your arrogance, your impudence,

your presumption, why should I not hurl you into outer darkness and eternal fire? That's what your sin, your rebellion, your wickedness, your puny attempts to dethrone God, have deserved: An eternity in the abyss with the devil and his demons. It is God who can point the finger at us. It is God's piercing gaze that sees through our arrogance and hypocrisy. It is God alone who has every right to point the finger at us, to accuse us and convict us and sentence us for all eternity.

But instead of accusing us, God turns his accusing finger aside and points it at another. The one who receives the accusations meant for you is the one called Jesus. He is God's Son, the Christ. And in this Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form. This God, this God who took on human flesh and became your brother, this God, who was born of a virgin mother, this God who was tempted in every way just as you are but never once sinned, this God now stands on trial. This God is the world's Redeemer, the sinless, spotless lamb, and he stands on trial before sinners. This God, this holy, righteous God, whom angels worship and all the holy armies of heaven adore, stands accused. This Jesus stands there on trial as your substitute. He's there in your place and mine. His enemies vehemently accuse him, but the accusations that are fired at him by petty human beings are not the things that make him guilty and condemn him to die. No, the things that stick to this Jesus, the things that cause his perfectly obedient soul to be covered in filth and guilt, are the sins that I have committed—those are the sins that cling to him, for there are none of his own. The wicked words that you have spoken, the evil thoughts that I have thought, the good that we have failed to do—those are the sins that cling to him, those are the accusations that stick. And not ours alone, but the countless sins of innumerable human beings from the first sin in the Garden to the last sin committed before the end of time—this is the burden of guilt that is charged to Jesus. This is what condemns him. This is what crucifies him. This is what sends him into the unspeakable hell of anguish as he suffers the wrath of his Father's justice. God is on trial. Jesus is accused. Jesus is condemned, and Jesus dies. So that justice can be served and justice can be satisfied, and so that you and I can stand forgiven. And we can point the finger at Jesus and say, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

This Ash Wednesday we reflect on the lesson God taught Job. It was a lesson of repentance. God pointed his finger at Job and asked, "Who do you think you are?" and Job was crushed with sorrow and repentance. *Then Job replied to the LORD: "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."*

For our accusations and finger-pointing against God, for our proud attempts to remove God from his throne, for our arrogance and presumption, for our every sin of commission and omission, for every evil that we have thought, spoken, or done—let this Ash Wednesday and every day be a day of humble confession and sincere sorrow, as we despise ourselves and repent in dust and ashes. And let this Ash Wednesday and every day be a day to lift up our eyes and lift up our hearts with joy, as you see Jesus, accused and condemned, going to the cross to suffer and die, to take all your sins away, to wash you clean, to make you completely right with God, to dress you in perfect righteousness, and to make you fit for heaven. And in that joy tonight, in the peace of forgiveness and in the strength of his Holy Spirit, who lives in you, take up your cross of discipleship and follow him. Amen.