

Ash Wednesday
February 10, 2016
Joel 2:12-19

“Return”

“Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster” (Joel 2:12-13).

If this day called Ash Wednesday, and this season called Lent, are about returning, as the prophet Joel calls us to do, then there first had to be a turning. You can't return unless you have first turned. And that first turning is what we find recorded very early on in Scripture in Genesis 3 when our first parents turned from the Lord to listen to another voice and follow another path – a voice and a path that were not life-giving, as they discovered, but bent on their destruction. And it has been so ever since. As sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, we have all turned aside from the Lord in our own lives; in ways that we know, but also in many ways that we do not know. Those powerful words from Isaiah 53 that will be read in worship on Good Friday remind us: **“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have *turned* – every one – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all”** (Isaiah 53:6). And so this day and this season serve a very useful purpose, especially in the hyper-permissive and no-fault culture that we live in. Ash Wednesday and the Lenten season call us to face the reality – the ugly reality that we would rather not face – that we have turned from the Lord to follow our own way. And the net result of this turning is death, even as we were graphically reminded in the imposition of ashes upon our foreheads. Those haunting words, first spoken by God to Adam, are now spoken to us: **“Remember, you are dust and to dust you shall return”** (Genesis 3:19b). And yet, despite our turning from the Lord – often deliberate, intentional, willful – there is hope: **“Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...”** (Joel 2:13). That is the theme for preaching this day: “Return.” May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

We know very little about the prophet Joel, and the time of his writing is uncertain. From his writing, it is clear that he had a heart-felt concern for the people of Judah and Jerusalem. He speaks of the coming “day of the Lord” (1:15; 2:1), a day that God's people eagerly anticipated as a day when God would judge and punish the nations and restore Israel to her former glory. We are prone to the same thinking: anxiously waiting for God to give it to “those people,” but looking forward to being exalted ourselves. Inspired by the Spirit of the Lord, Joel made clear that because God's people had also turned from the Lord and were unfaithful, they too would be judged and punished. Therefore, Joel urged everyone to repent and return to the Lord – not merely with outward show, such as tearing one's clothing as a sign of grief. No, returning to the Lord must come from the heart. This returning and repentance cannot be mere surface stuff, just going through the motions to “check the box.” Rather, true repentance must go deep within us as the psalmist writes: **“A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise”** (Psalm 51:18b). When was the last time we experienced this kind of heart-felt contrition and sorrow over our sin? When our heart is broken over the ugly truth that we have turned from the Lord in thought, word, and deed, “by the evil we have done and the good we have failed to do,” when our heart is contrite and full of remorse because of this, then the door is opened for returning to the Lord.

The Exhortation spoken earlier in this service is a reminder of the reality and seriousness of turning from the Lord, what Scripture calls sin: “God created us to experience joy in communion with him, to love all humanity, and to live in harmony with all of his creation. But sin separates us from God, our neighbors, and creation, and so we do not enjoy the life our Creator intended for us. Also, by our sin we grieve our

Father, who does not desire us to come under his judgment, but to turn to him and live. As disciples of the Lord Jesus we are called to struggle against everything that leads us away from love of God and neighbor.” This day and this season are about spiritual housecleaning in each of our lives. The words of that Exhortation continue: “Repentance, fasting, prayer, and works of love – the discipline of Lent – help us to wage our spiritual warfare. I invite you, therefore, to commit yourselves to this struggle and confess your sins, asking our Father for strength to persevere in your Lenten discipline.” These are the resources, the tools, that help us to return to the Lord.

In truth, if we are going to return to the Lord, if we are going to roll up our sleeves and get down to business with that spiritual housecleaning, a cleansing agent is needed – and a strong one at that. Mere soap and water won’t cut it. Bleach, detergent, and all the other cleaning supplies out there won’t do it, either. All of the promises, oaths, and sacrifices that we could make will not suffice. The stain is *that* deeply embedded in our human nature. What is needed is blood – not yours and not mine, but Jesus’ blood. Ironic as it sounds, only Jesus’ blood will make us clean within. It is only through that cleansing blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), that we can return to the Lord, and be assured of finding hope, forgiveness, and new life. This is why Paul says what he does in the Epistle lesson: **“We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”** (2 Corinthians 5:20b-21). It is Jesus himself who meets us here at the table He has prepared. Here, Jesus gives us his very Body and Blood to eat and to drink so that we may be strengthened in our faith, and with confidence return to the Lord our God, trusting that for Jesus’ sake, the Lord God is indeed **“gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love”** (Joel 2:13).

I invite you to return each Wednesday evening for midweek Lenten worship. Our theme for midweek preaching will be “Places of the Passion,” which will focus on those places of Jesus’ passion, suffering, and death recorded in Scripture – places like the upper room, the Garden of Gethsemane, the halls of Pontius Pilate, and the hill of Golgotha. But Jesus also visits the most troubling places of our lives, and through his grace, they become places of new life that lead us to return to him. When Jesus enters a place, He never leaves it as He found it but transforms it as only He can do.

May the Lord who calls us to return to him bless our journey through these forty days of Lent to Easter joy and resurrection. Amen.