

REPENT

Joel 2:12-19

Ash Wednesday

March 6, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The Old Testament lesson for Ash Wednesday comes from *The prophet Joel*, chapter 2, verses 12 through 19. In this Scripture, the prophet calls the people of Judah to repentance, fleeing to the LORD for mercy. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Joel 2, beginning at verse 12, we read in Jesus' name.

- 12 “Yet even now,” declares the LORD,
“return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
13 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.
- 14 Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for the LORD your God?
- 15 Blow the trumpet in Zion;
consecrate a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
16 gather the people.
Consecrate the congregation;
assemble the elders;
gather the children,
even nursing infants.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her chamber.
- 17 Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep
and say, “Spare your people, O LORD,
and make not your heritage a reproach,
a byword among the nations.
Why should they say among the peoples,
‘Where is their God?’ ”
- 18 Then the LORD became jealous for his land
and had pity on his people.
- 19 The LORD answered and said to his people,
“Behold, I am sending to you
grain, wine, and oil,
and you will be satisfied;

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and I will no more make you
a reproach among the nations.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. It's where we came from, and it's where we're going. It's not supposed to be this way, but it is. The first man, Adam, came from the dirt. Now, I suppose, since we came from dirt in the first place, it might seem natural for us that we would return to the dirt. Whenever we make something from the dirt of the ground, it always returns there. Whether it's a sand castle or a sod house or whatever else it is we might be able to form from dirt, it has a very temporary feeling to it. That's because, in our experience, things we make from dirt don't last. Even if you spend your entire day at the beach protecting your sandcastle from your sister, your parents will tell you it's time to go home, and the weather will get it, probably before the next day comes. Whenever we make something from the ground, we expect it to be temporary. So we might think it natural that we would return to the ground, based simply on the fact that we came from the ground. But it's not natural, or, at least, it's not supposed to be natural.

God builds things differently than we do. He builds them better. He knows how to build things that will last, not just for decades or centuries, but forever. That's what he did when he formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed the breath of life into him. The same is true for the woman who was taken from his side. Being made in the image of God, and having the tree of life to eat from, there was really only one way for them to die: to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But that is the way they chose, that is why they died, and that is why we die. So God said to the man,

“By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19).

So we remember our mortality, and we remember that it is because of sin. Death is not natural, at least not in the way nature was supposed to be. Death is the result of sin. It has spread to us as a direct result of Adam's disobedience. But this does not mean we are innocent victims. There was only one innocent victim. Every day we consciously continue the rebellion. We were born wretched, and we continue to be wretched. So the fact that we were born wretched does not get us off the hook for the wretched things we do. The fair thing for God to do would have been to never even let us exist in the first place. Remember, it is not God who made us this way. We became like this because our human ancestors chose this path. It's really an act of mercy that God allows us to exist. If you're building a sand castle, and it becomes completely wretched from the very start, the sensible thing to do is knock it down and start over. That seems like the sensible thing for God to do with us, but he chose to love us instead. And by "love," I don't just mean that he developed warm feelings of attachment to us. I mean that he resolved to do what is best for us, despite our wretchedness and despite his anger toward us. God is not responsible for our inborn wretchedness. He takes on the responsibility of solving it, but he is not responsible for its inception. Our first parents are responsible for it. So that inborn wretchedness is passed down

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to us, and we daily decide to live in it. So we are guilty in these two ways: first, by our nature, and second, by our actual sins, that is, the thoughts, words, and deeds we commit that are contrary to God's will. And since death came about as a result of sin, the death we experience reminds us to repent. And, remember, death is not simply that terminal event at the end of life, but the daily experience of living in a corrupted world. The experience of death reminds us of the need for repentance. So we repent, both of who we are, and of what we do.

In the Old Testament lesson, the prophet Joel calls the people of Judah to repentance. His call to repentance applies also to us, because a call to repentance is always appropriate in a sinful world. But our context as Christians is not identical to that of Judah in the Old Testament, so in order to see how this call to repentance applies to us, it's helpful to first understand what was happening then.

There aren't very many historical references in the book of Joel, so it's hard to pinpoint the date exactly, but as best as we can tell, he prophesied sometime between 848 and 800 BC. This was during the time of the divided kingdom. Joel prophesied in the southern kingdom, which went by the name "Judah." They had the city of Jerusalem, which is where the temple was, and it was also where the kings in the line of David ruled. Some of those kings were good, but some of them were bad. When the kings were bad, they often led the people astray to worship other gods. When this happened, God would send a prophet to call them to repentance, or perhaps the next king would be better and would lead the people back to the LORD. So Judah's history was very up and down. Sometimes they were true to the LORD their God, and he blessed their land. Other times they were rebellious, and God sent famines or foreign armies to discipline them. In the context of Joel, there was a famine, and God threatened armies from the north.

Joel prophesied of the "Day of the LORD," which would come upon Judah as a great disaster. This was all based on what we call the "Mosaic Covenant." That's the covenant God made, through Moses, with the people of Israel when he brought them out of slavery in Egypt and settled them in their own land. The gist of the covenant was that if the people would be faithful to worship the LORD alone, then God would bless them in their new land and protect them from the nations around them. However, if they disobeyed and went after other gods, God would remove this blessing from them (Lev. 26; Deut. 30:15-20).

So two basic things to notice about this covenant: First, it was conditional. Other covenants God made, like the covenants with Abraham and David, were unconditional. But the covenant through Moses had conditions. The blessings were not guaranteed forever; they could be lost. It really was based on works. Second, the promised blessings of this covenant were temporal and physical. They were not eternal and spiritual like the promises made to Abraham and David. The promises applied specifically to the land, and the covenant became obsolete when it was fulfilled by Christ. So there was a specific time and place for this covenant, but that does not mean it is irrelevant for us today. It teaches us about God's justice, faithfulness, and mercy. And in many ways, it points forward to Christ, teaching us about the greater spiritual and eternal blessings God promises through him. And it reminds us of the need for repentance.

The prophet Joel could point to the famine or the armies of the north marching down toward Judah. He could point to these as signs of God's judgment and issue a call to repentance. He could do this because he was a prophet of God, and he knew these things, but also because God had specifically threatened these judgments if the people were disobedient. In this Mosaic Covenant, if the disasters came upon the land, they knew God had removed his hand from them,

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and it could only be because of their disobedience. So these things were always a clear sign of rebellion and a call to repentance.

We have signs for repentance as well, though they are not tied directly to our specific sins as were the signs given to Judah. Our signs for repentance are the death and evil all around us—both without and within. I say these are not directly related to our specific sins, because God doesn't operate on the basis of karma. If I get sick, it's not because I thought, said, or did something evil against my neighbor. But it is a result of the original sin, and so it is connected to the sinful nature that has been passed down to us. When we experience death, it should remind us of our corrupt and sinful condition, and it should lead us to repentance, that is, to confess our sins and seek forgiveness in Christ. Death is one of our signs, reminding us to repent.

For Judah, the famine and the armies of the north were their clear signs. So the prophet calls for the whole nation to repent. He calls for the outward signs of repentance: fasting, weeping, and mourning (2:12). But he also knows that repentance can become ritualistic. We know the right things to do and the right words to say, and when we go through the process of repentance often—and we should—these things can become rote. So he also says, “Rend your hearts and not your garments” (2:13).

In other words, repentance is not an outward ritual where we bow in the right posture and say the right words to pacify God. There's nothing wrong with the right posture, and there's nothing wrong with the right words. The problem isn't with the ritual. And our problem isn't with the words in the confession of sin. Our problem is that we barely think about them. Two things can happen when we have our confession of sin memorized. One is good and one is bad. The good thing is that it's readily available to us. It's written on the wrinkles of our brains, and this allows us to meditate on the meaning of it. But there's also a bad thing: we can say the words without ever thinking about them. Don't just go through the motions, because the purpose of motions is to affect the heart. When you confess your sins, let your heart hear the words of your mouth.

Even the discipline of fasting, which Jesus warns about in the gospel lesson, is a good thing. In fact, Jesus assumes his disciples will fast, because he says, “**When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites**” (Matt. 6:16). It seems to me that the discipline of fasting has fallen by the wayside among us. I'm certainly guilty of this. We kind of have this perception of fasting as just ritualistic or some kind of works righteousness. But fasting is good. Giving up something for Lent is good. That's a form of fasting. I think I've half-jokingly said before, that if you want to give something up for Lent, you should give up sinning. Well, the thing is, we should always be trying to give up sinning. Fasting is when you give up something that isn't sinful in order discipline yourself and devote your time or resources to prayer, the Word of God, or service to your neighbor. The danger is that it can become a way of demonstrating your personal holiness, either to God or to those around us. And that is wrong, but it doesn't mean we should abandon the practice. Don't just go through the motions, because the purpose of the motions is to affect the heart.

God sees the heart, so the prophet calls the nation to repent from the heart. And he doesn't just call some of them to repent. He calls all of them to repent.

“Consecrate the congregation;
assemble the elders;
gather the children,
even the nursing infants” (2:16).

The guilt of the nation didn't just belong to the rulers or the grownups. It belonged to all the people, even the children, including the nursing infants. This reminds us that the guilt of

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humanity doesn't just belong to those of us with the mental capacity to know better. The problem with our sinful nature isn't so much in our minds, as it is in our hearts. Our hearts are turned away from God. Our children and infants need repentance and forgiveness as well. So Joel calls the entire nation to repent.

He even calls the newlywed bride and groom to come. These are people with much to rejoice over, and rightly so; their joy is good. But the prophet says repentance is more important. Forget your joy. Fast, weep, and mourn with the rest of us, because if the LORD sends disaster upon us, your joy will soon be gone anyway. Repent. All of us, repent.

But the strangest thing, at least in my mind, about Joel's call to repentance, is the uncertainty of the result. He says,

“Who knows whether he will not turn and relent?” (2:14). The prophet isn't even certain God will hear and rescue them. They might still die anyway. I suppose he recognizes that if they do die, it will be just, but their only chance is to repent and flee to God's mercy. Perhaps “he will turn and relent.”

Now the same logic would hold true for us regarding our sins. Even if forgiveness were not a certainty, we should still repent. But here is one of the key differences between the Old Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. That covenant was conditional. It depended on the obedience of the people. The New Covenant in Jesus Christ is unconditional. It depends on the obedience of Jesus Christ. So God doesn't say, “I will forgive you ... if you stop sinning.” That would be pointless. If we could stop sinning, we wouldn't need forgiveness. Instead, we have the unconditional promise, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). There's no “if you stop sinning” clause.

Of course, that doesn't mean we are free to go on sinning as before. With contrition over our sins, there is always a desire to turn away from our sins and practice righteousness. But the actual amendment of our ways is not a part of Christian repentance. Christian repentance consists of these two things: contrition over our sins and faith in Jesus Christ. The amendment of our ways follows as the fruit of repentance. And we find the assurance of our salvation, not in our own personal performance, but in the blood of Jesus. So if you fail to completely amend your ways, it doesn't mean you're not forgiven. But it does mean what we should have known all along: that the entire Christian life is one of repentance.

Repentance isn't something we do once and then we're good to go. It's a way of life. It's these two truths that we keep in our minds and in our hearts. First, “That we are by nature sinful and unclean, and that we have sinned against [God] in thought, word, and deed.” And second, that “Almighty God, our heavenly Father, has had mercy upon us and has given His only Son to die for us, and for His sake forgives us all our sins.”

This is the life of repentance. This is the life of a Christian.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. We came from the ground, and we will return to the ground. But our Savior has already been to the grave, and he has sanctified it as a resting place instead of a permanent end. So just as God once formed man from the dust of the ground, he will again draw us up from the dust and breathe the breath of life back into us. And this time, it will stay. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.