

Preparing for the Journey

March 1, 2017

Joel 2: 1-2 and 12-17:

¹Sound the trumpet on Zion, the LORD's sacred hill. Warn everyone to tremble! The judgment day of the LORD is coming soon. ²It will be dark and gloomy with storm clouds overhead. Troops will cover the mountains like thunderclouds. No army this powerful has ever been gathered before or will ever be again.

¹²The LORD said: It isn't too late. You can still return to me with all your heart. Start crying and mourning! Go without eating. ¹³Don't rip your clothes to show your sorrow. Instead, turn back to me with broken hearts. I am merciful, kind, and caring. I don't easily lose my temper, and I don't like to punish. ¹⁴I am the LORD your God. Perhaps I will change my mind and treat you with mercy. Then you will be blessed with enough grain and wine for offering sacrifices to me. ¹⁵Sound the trumpet on Zion! Call the people together. Show your sorrow by going without food. ¹⁶Make sure that everyone is fit to worship me. Bring adults, children, babies, and even bring newlyweds from their festivities. ¹⁷Tell my servants, the priests, to cry inside the temple and to offer this prayer near the altar: "Save your people, LORD God! Don't let foreign nations make jokes about us. Don't let them laugh and ask, 'Where is your God?'"

Matthew 6: 1-6 and 16-21:

¹When you do good deeds, don't try to show off. If you do, you won't get a reward from your Father in heaven. ²When you give to the poor, don't blow a loud horn. That's what show-offs do in the meeting places and on the street

corners, because they are always looking for praise. I can assure you that they already have their reward. ³ When you give to the poor, don't let anyone know about it. ⁴ Then your gift will be given in secret. Your Father knows what is done in secret, and he will reward you. ⁵ When you pray, don't be like those show-offs who love to stand up and pray in the meeting places and on the street corners. They do this just to look good. I can assure you that they already have their reward. ⁶ When you pray, go into a room alone and close the door. Pray to your Father in private. He knows what is done in private, and he will reward you.

¹⁶ When you go without eating, don't try to look gloomy as those show-offs do when they go without eating. I can assure you that they already have their reward. ¹⁷ Instead, comb your hair and wash your face. ¹⁸ Then others won't know that you are going without eating. But your Father sees what is done in private, and he will reward you. ¹⁹ Don't store up treasures on earth! Moths and rust can destroy them, and thieves can break in and steal them. ²⁰ Instead, store up your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy them, and thieves cannot break in and steal them. ²¹ Your heart will always be where your treasure is.

In our first reading tonight, the prophet Joel calls upon the emergency response system of Zion to "blow the trumpet." He is essentially setting off an alarm like the one heard at noon in many communities around our state and nation. But in this case, the alarm is not a test. It is a signal that they are in a state of emergency. And according to Joel, just what is the emergency? Well, the day of the Lord is coming near!! And, in our passage, the response required of the

people is described. Joel writes, in verses twelve and thirteen, "*The LORD said: It isn't too late. You can still return to me with all your heart. Start crying and mourning! Go without eating. ¹³ Don't rip your clothes to show your sorrow. Instead, turn back to me with broken hearts.*" They are to begin preparations for this imminent emergency by assembling the people and calling them to return their hearts to the Lord. There is no time to waste! They must gather the people, prepare for a fast, and throw themselves on the mercy of the Lord before it is too late. Continuing in verses thirteen through sixteen, we hear God's call to the people: "*I am merciful, kind, and caring... I am the LORD your God. Perhaps I will change my mind and treat you with mercy... Show your sorrow by going without food. Make sure that everyone is fit to worship me.*"

Joel is writing about repentance, about changing our ways and turning back to God. This is where Lent begins. It is when we repent, when we kneel at the altar rail, that we turn back to God. So, we begin this season tonight with communion. In the sacrament of communion, we acknowledge our guilt, we confess our sins, we seek God's mercy and forgiveness, and, through the power of the body and blood of Jesus, we are made new again. From this place of righteousness, we can walk forward in penitence. Penitence is also a part of Lent. Penitence does not mean that we "feeling sorry" or we "feeling guilty," though these feelings may sometimes accompany the work of penitence. Penitence as we embody it in this service and throughout this season means acknowledging where we are, who we are, owning up to it, recognizing that we cannot fix ourselves, and seeking God's mercy and power to renew us and restore us. In short, it is admitting that God alone can save us.

After receiving communion here in the center aisle and perhaps spending some time at the altar, we will proceed on to the front corner to receive the imposition of ashes. The ashes remind us of our mortality, of the fact that we will all one day return to the earth. In the Bible, ashes are symbolic of mourning and repentance. Lent is a time of repentance, fasting, and preparation for the coming of Easter. It is a time of reflection and self-examination. Traditionally, in the Old Testament, when one would fast, they would wear sackcloth, sit in the dust, and put ashes on their heads. This is where the tradition of ashes comes from. The ashes are formed in the shape of a cross, symbolizing that we belong to Jesus. Fasting was traditionally part of Lent in the early church. It was abstaining from something in order to focus more on our faith. Today many continue these traditions by practicing a 'fast' during Lent – going without chocolate or pop, not eating meat on Fridays, and so on. Some actually fast one day a week during Lent and dedicate meal time to extra time with God. Still others decide to set aside time to add something spiritual at Lent, such as a personal devotional study or a small group study.

In our Matthew text, Jesus begins by telling us not to show off when we do good deeds and warns against doing things just to impress other people. He says not to blow our own horn when we help someone in need, but to give in secret; to be humble instead of seeking praise from our fellow man. Jesus even advises against the fasting practices of some. For some people, the fast was done to draw attention to oneself. In practicing a fast, instead of wearing sackcloth and sitting in the dust with ash on your forehead, Jesus instructs his disciples to, "*comb your hair and wash your face. Then others won't know that you are going without eating.*" In this way, you will not draw attention to yourself,

people will not distract you, and you will be able to focus on God alone. Jesus goes on to say, "*But your Father sees what is done in private, and he will reward you.*" Jesus says, God will know you are fasting. That is all that matters.

As Christians, our call is to seek to please not the people around us, but the God who made us. Matthew tells us the way to do this. In verses nineteen through twenty-one, He says, "*Don't store up treasures on earth! Moths and rust can destroy them, and thieves can break in and steal them.* ²⁰ *Instead, store up your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy them, and thieves cannot break in and steal them.* ²¹ *Your heart will always be where your treasure is.*" When our focus is on God and the things of God, then we store up these treasures in heaven. So, as we move through Lent, may God be our focus.

While Ash Wednesday may not signal an imminent return of the Lord (for no one knows the day or the hour of his return, not the angels in heaven or even the Son, but only the Father), it does serve as reminder of our call to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The annual call to observe a holy Lent begins with repentance. By receiving a mark of our mortal nature, we begin Lent with a reminder that we need to live as people who are prepared to stand before our Lord at any time, even as early as this very day, and to justly receive the judgment that the Lord renders upon our lives. Therefore, Lent is a season of preparation.

The cross of ashes is also a stark reminder that life, whether a hundred years or but a few, is brief. Every moment is precious. We never know when our time on this earth will come to an end. Lent reminds us that we must do all that we can with our lives, with each second and minute and hour and day that our Lord

gives us. Lent calls us to live in the way that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has taught us to live. So, as we begin this holy season together, let us respond to the call that is built into our faith tradition. Let us hear the call to action. Let us hear the invitation to observe a holy Lent. May we rise each day and do what we need to do to be prepared for whatever may come each day. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, may we march courageously and faithfully through this season side by side, shoulder to shoulder, as disciples trusting completely in the promises of our God, made known to us in Jesus Christ.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the season of Lent. We start this time of preparation as we seek to realign our lives with the vows of our baptismal covenant, while also acknowledging our human limitations. We are mortal. We are broken. We have deeply ingrained habits marked by sin, stained by selfishness, and we resist our own efforts to change them. It is through the prayer, repentance, penitence, fasting, and time in the Word that we find the strength and power to walk as God calls us to walk. Whether through personal study, in our online Facebook group, or in a small group, may we each be people who are seeking Christ and a deeper relationship with Him as we journey through this holy season of Lent. Let us pray.