

Pastor's Message – Ash Wednesday, 2022
Joel 2:12-19
2 Corinthians 5:21b-6:2

Tonight's Bible readings contain both an invitation and a command. The invitation is to "return to the lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." With the invitation, there is also a command that is most appropriate for Ash Wednesday and the full season of Lent: "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people." Both of these suggest that there is something important about what we do tonight and what we think about tonight.

But I wonder if the reasons behind the invitation and the command are things that are foremost in our minds. There are, after all, plenty of things for us to worry about, so many things that, I wonder, if we give any thought to the "Day of the Lord?" Do we give much thought to our own end or the end of the world as we know it? Do we even seriously consider how or even if we have turned away from God?

Tonight as we enjoy the comfort of our church service, many people are sitting in jail cells, serving time for various crimes they have committed. We can't get away from that in Waupun where we have three prisons in our area and one just a block away from the Church building. This fact should shock us into a kind of stark look at the reality of judgment. Certain actions have certain consequences. That is what this day, Ash Wednesday, tells us about also. Actions have consequences.

As we consider what we have said and done and how we have failed to be as loving and Christian as we might have been, we might consider, "Who can endure the "Day of the LORD?" The reading from Joel that we heard tonight is a prophetic wake-up call, the day when the church traditionally calls its members to repentance.

Joel is writing in the context of a terrible plague of locusts (1:4), which he interprets as a sign of God's judgment on a faithless people. In chapter 2, he sounds the alarm, warning of the approaching destruction. The omitted section, verses 3-11, makes it clear that the devastation is that of approaching locusts, although he describes them metaphorically as though they were an invading army. (Locusts, in fact, could be more destructive than any human army, stripping farm fields bare and destroying a nation's livelihood in a single, disastrous day.) Verse 11 ends by saying that the coming day of the Lord will indeed be terrible -- who can endure it?

It reminds me of the question we don't ever want to ask, but are sometimes forced to ask in dire circumstances, "Am I going to die?" "Without a doubt,

sooner or later, you and I are going to die." It is a reminder none of us likes to hear.... "Remember that you are mortal," that is, remember that you are going to die. Death comes to all of us, and the question is, "What then?" Some glibly think that, after our deaths, we shall all automatically have eternal life. Of course there is life after death, we believe, and of course we shall all enjoy it. But not all.

The Church just had an automatic door installed last week – a wonderful thing. It is helpful for those who may have some difficulty walking. But, more than that, we like automatic things: automatic coffee, automatic transmissions in our vehicles, automatic office doors, automatic happiness in marriage, and so too automatic life after death. Few of us stop to tremble before the specter of death, as our Bible reading from Joel pictures people trembling (Joel 2:1).

It used to be that every telephone sounded essentially the same. Today, however, we can program our phones to play all sorts of pleasing or amusing personalized ringtones. Even the term is becoming a misnomer, for the younger generations may not associate phones with "ringing" at all.

Likewise, the alarms we set to awaken us in the morning is another area of tremendous variety now. Once upon a time, alarm clocks simply rang. Then some electronic versions offered an alternative: the buzz. Now, however, we can awaken to all sorts of sound effects, voices, messages, programming, and music.

Some sounds, of course, are neutral. Or at least situational. Doesn't it always make us smile when we here in the Church building hear Nora running into worship on Sunday mornings? On the other hand, aren't we most likely to be annoyed by the shrill and strident sound of a smoke alarm? Other sounds are more variable. They evoke different feelings on different days.

Let us imagine, for example, a teenage girl, who is awaiting a phone call from the boy she likes at school. Rumor has it that he may like her, too, and is thinking of calling her to ask her out on a date.

Meanwhile, let us also imagine that, living in that same house with the girl is her middle-aged father, whose doctor recently ordered a certain battery of medical tests. Those test results will serve to confirm or refute the doctor's grim suspicions and the father's worst fears. The doctor has promised to call with the results sometime this afternoon.

When the telephone rings in that house, what happens?

The teenage girl and her father hear the same sound. It is the same pitch and decibel level for both. The sound waves that reach each one's ears are identical. However, the internal reaction of the two people is vastly different. The sound of the phone instantly fills the teenage girl with excitement. The same sound grips her father with apprehension and anxiety.

Well, the prophet Joel called for the sound of a trumpet. What feelings would that evoke? How did the trumpet sound?

When one reads all three chapters of Joel, it is apparent that this prophet is not chiding or criticizing, nor is he condemning or even judging the people. Rather, his concern is to comfort the distress in the hearts of the people as they face the desolation of their land. A plague of locusts has devastated the land. Like an armed force of invaders with teeth as sharp as those of a lion, they have destroyed the grapevines, chewed up the fig trees and the olive trees. The fields are bare. The very ground mourns. Joel adds, "The joy of the people is gone." For many people in this world, the locusts have stripped their fields bare. Metaphorical locusts are at loose in our whole world in these days.

And so, Paul makes a plea to the church at Corinth and to us, "We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." God has extended to the world to all who know themselves to be sinners. Jesus became "sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Now is the acceptable time. The message to us from the prophet Joel and from Paul is not all darkness and gloom, for through his prophets, God utters that, "Yet even now." "Yet even now ... return to me ... return to the Lord," we are urged twice in our passage (vv. 12, 13). Even now, in the midst of our sinful ways, when we have been so busy with our own affairs that we have repeatedly neglected others; even now when we have forgotten to rely on God and have counted on our own self-sufficiency; even now when we have burdened our souls with pride and anger and guilt; even now when we think we do not have a prayer with which to stand before the Lord our God -- even now, in your situation and mine, God spreads wide his arms of mercy on a cross and invites us to turn to him.

I remember an article on National Public Radio with a stonecutter who worked on a cathedral in Washington, D.C. This stone carver was a fifth generation Greek craftsman. But he said in the interview that he was the end of the line. There was simply no more demand for stone carvers. That phrase -- the end of the line -- should bother us. Let us work and pray together that for us individually and as a nation this is not the end of the line. God has called us into the valley of judgment. Can we answer and defend ourselves? Not really. Our one chance is that the Galilean carpenter who goes with us everywhere can change our hearts and lives. In our reading from the Book of the prophet Joel tonight, God invites us to do just that.

The Genesis 3 story is certainly true, in this respect: no one is exempt from death. Even Jesus, the very Son of God, had to die, partly because his birth and life as a human being like us caused him to share fully in the human experience of life and death, and because he was born to atone for the sins of others and offer salvation to repentant sinners. The grip of death is destroyed and people are released in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Easter reverses Ash Wednesday's awful announcement and says, "You are children of God, and through the living Christ you shall live forever." The death of human beings is preached during the season of Lent in the shadow of the cross; Jesus had to die in order to conquer death once and for all. The final and total victory will come at the end of time. When Jesus returns, death, which has been already conquered by Christ, will be no more. The Second Coming of the Lord will usher in the day of abundant and eternal life for the children of God.

But to borrow from a Greek myth, "How do we get across the River Styx when our time has come?" It is through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that God offers a return to us. The way is open to the Father. The deed has been done. Christ has cleared the stumbling blocks of our sins that would keep us from walking the path back to God and crossing the river that flows by the throne of God.

Perhaps, some sunny day, you have experienced a bird suddenly flying into a window with a dramatic thud. That bird probably dropped to the ground stunned. After a while it regained its composure and flew away. Sudden trauma comes in the middle of such nice times and God helps us recover and go on.

Is that an invitation that all of us gathered here in this sanctuary and those who are worshipping in other places at other times will accept? Will we all replace our little Lenten practices with true amendment of our lives? Will we truly be God's people, loving him with all our hearts, studying his Word, worshiping his name, praying to him daily, and showing mercy and justice to our neighbors? The way is open to that amendment. Christ will give you his Spirit to walk in it. We simply have to open our hearts to him and let him have our committed lives.

The ashes that we place on our foreheads or wrists tonight remind us that we are fallen and we can't get up on our own. We need God's help. We need God's forgiveness for our sin. And we need God's love, like a mother who gathers her children to her to nurture and protect them.

That is finally the hope that is scratched in the ash on our foreheads, that God's love has reached all the way to earth, to the dust from which we have been made, and made of the dust the peace of heart and spirit that we seek. Made with tender mercy and loving care, just like that dust God took in hand to shape the first creatures, man and woman. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus....

"Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation ... (Joel 2:15-16a) "Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation." Ash Wednesday is our annual wakeup call -- a time for us to get going again. It is a time to overcome obstacles; it is a time, as Paul rightly states, to (5:20c) "be reconciled with God."