

March 1, 2017
Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17
2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
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Blow the trumpet! Sound the alarm on God's holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, For the day of the Lord is coming, it is near – A day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains. A dramatic shift from last Sunday's gospel when we climbed the mountain with Jesus and the disciples. A mountain on which we saw Jesus shining like the sun in dazzling white robes with Moses and Elijah by his side. What is the impending disaster that prompts the prophet, Joel to sound such a dire warning to the people?

Some of us remember the weekly warnings of the 50s and 60s. Every Friday we heard the plaintive siren reminding us that we lived under the threat of nuclear war. Children today prepare for "active shooters" in their schools. We are continually on guard against threats, foreign and domestic.

Joel is not warning against an outsider threat. The prophet sounds the alarm for the people of Israel to return to the ways of God. "Return to the Lord", he says, "with all your heart, fasting, with weeping and mourning". The people have wandered away from God.

Joel, speaking on behalf of a gracious and merciful God is calling the people to repent, turn around, go in the direction God has called them to go.

It is good that we hear these words today. Ash Wednesday. It is good that we gather today to sanctify a fast. It is good that we gather in silence and solemnity. It is good that we sanctify the whole assembly young and old, men and women, all of God's people.

To sanctify is to set apart that someone or something for the use intended by its designer. A pen is "sanctified" when used to write. Eyeglasses are "sanctified" when used to improve sight.

In the theological sense, things are sanctified when they are used for the purpose God intends. A human being is sanctified when she lives according to God's design and purpose. No human being or thing shares the holiness of God. Humans cannot make themselves holy, only God can make us holy. So, when Joel announces that the people are to sanctify the congregation, it is God to whom the people must turn.

On this day of ashes, we sanctify the congregation by remembering that it is God who is holy, it is God who makes us holy.

Today we remember that we are created from the dust of the earth and we will return to the dust of the earth.

It all sounds so bleak! So hopeless! To escape the bleak hopelessness, we tend to rely on our cleverly devised myths that would have us believe we can "pull ourselves up by our bootstraps". We celebrate the "self-made" individual, the one who has overcome adversity and succeeded.

We are, powerless on our own to overcome or conquer the arrows of empire or the vagaries of life in a broken world. It is only through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we prevail against the vicissitudes of daily living. We prevail against all threats, foreign and domestic because of God's incomprehensible grace and mercy.

This truth gives us cause to shout from the rooftops, to blow the trumpet, not in warning, but in joy.

But Jesus tell us to give alms in secret. To pray in secret. To make our fast in secret. This makes no sense! Are we really to hide our love for God aren't we supposed to be the light of Christ to the world that is in pain? The parting words of the baptism liturgy exhort the newly baptized to "let your light so shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father who is in heaven".

Aha! Maybe that's it! The glory, the holiness, the sanctity belong to God, not to us.

God sees our secrets and loves us anyway.

God sees our fears and calms us in the night.

God sees our hopes, our sadness, our joy . . . all of it.

And God, filled with compassion and love for all of creation steps right into the middle of the mess with us, breathes, eats, sleeps, weeps, laughs and dies. And conquers death! The reward is immeasurable and it is ours!

Thanks be to God!