

RETURN TO GOD

2/17/17 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA (*Livestreamed*)
Ash Wednesday: Joel 2:12-13 (CEV)

Have you noticed that, over the last year, scripture has often seemed much more relevant than in the past. That feels true today. Our reading from Joel says: "Yet even now, return to the LORD with all your hearts." And I think, "That's right. Even now."

Even now, though we haven't been in our church building for close to a year; even now, when we're worried about the thousands and thousands of people still being exposed to, and treated for, COVID-19; even now, as we struggle to find the best ways of keeping ourselves and our neighbors safe; even now, when we wonder: "How much longer can we do this?"; "Even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your hearts."

Of course, the follow-up thought is, and what does "return to God with all our hearts" mean in our current context? What does it mean for some of us to be completely frustrated with having to be around our families 24/7; fed-up with using the dining room table as an office and watching our kids struggle with online school. What does it mean to "return to God with all our hearts," when we're so busy fighting this idea of the "new normal", because it doesn't feel normal at all?

I find the words in this passage from Joel to be quite comforting. The Lord says, "Return to me with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow." Frankly, I'm relieved that weeping and sorrow are included in that list. There are plenty of things we have been fasting from this past year: big celebrations, vacations...even communion—and we might forget that weeping and sorrow are perfectly acceptable reactions to this situation.

It's also helpful to remember that this weeping and sorrow are not about beating ourselves up for the ways we've been "bad Christians." That would have more to do with what we look like on the outside—what we look like to others; which is what the passage refers to as our "outward clothing". Instead, the kind of weeping and sorrow mentioned in Joel—is about our personal relationship with God, and feeling sad about the times we forgot God was with us, or that God was available to us. Joel calls that the "tearing" of our hearts.

A few weeks ago, at our Zoom coffee hour, as we were sharing what stood out for us during the worship service, one person expressed gratitude for the hymn: "Just a Closer Walk with Thee." We talked about what a great reminder the refrain is: "Daily walking close to Thee."

With Ash Wednesday, we kick off the season of Lent, which is very much about our daily walk with Christ. Epiphany is bookended by very inward-focused seasons. Advent is an inner journey of preparation—waiting, in expectation, for the Christ child. Then, as we've talked about, over the past month and a half, Epiphany is much more outward focused. It's a season of us learning to share the Good News of the birth of Jesus with the world around us. And, now, as we enter into Lent, our focus moves back inward.

Specifically, Lent is about cleansing ourselves and engaging in forms of self-emptying or fasting—that is letting go of anything that has gotten in the way of our daily walk with Christ. The prayer I'll use as we prepare to impose ashes refers to that process as "self-denial." But the intent is not simply giving up something, so that we can say, "I gave up sugar, or alcohol, or chocolate during Lent."

The intent is that we might notice something that has become an “idol” in our own lives, and declare, “that practice; that obsession with the news—or the belief that our church building is the only place we can truly worship God—whatever that idol is in your life, choose to focus your self-discipline on that, this Lent...on dismantling that idol, so that you’re ready for the Easter Good News of the resurrected Christ.

The passage from Joel goes on to say that God is “merciful and compassionate, very patient, full of faithful love, and ready to forgive.” So, as we touch our foreheads with ashes we’ll do so in the same cross pattern that was marked on our forehead by the clergy baptizing us, as they proclaimed: “You are marked as Christ’s own forever.”

Today, you’ll each retrace that cross pattern with ashes as I say: “You are but dust and to dust you shall return,” reminding you that—as temporal as our bodies are—our eternal God lives within us. We belong to God and to God we shall return. “Even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your hearts.”

-AMEN

Collect of the Day:

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Joel 2:12-13 (*Common English Version*)

Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your hearts, with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow; tear your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, very patient, full of faithful love, and ready to forgive.