

## Homily for Ash Wednesday

Sermon 51 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 26, 2020

Joel 2: 1-2, 12 – 17

In just a few moments we will participate in the ancient ritual of placing ashes on our foreheads as we hear the words from Genesis 3:19 reminding us that “we are dust. And to dust, we shall return.” It is an ancient practice that dates all the way back to the sixth century and Pope Gregory the Great. So, for nearly 1400 years Catholics and eventually mainline Protestants also set this day aside as a holy day, a day of confession and repentance, a day to mark the beginning of the season of Lent. *What better way to begin a season of confession and repentance than with ashes smeared on our foreheads reminding us of our human condition?*

Long before Pope Gregory began the tradition of ashes, people recognized that there was a need for repentance, for confession, for forgiveness. With the earliest stories of our faith, we remember Adam and Eve and their sin in the Garden of Eden. We remember the stories about their children, the second generation who work in the fields, bickering as siblings do... and competing over things both large and small. We remember their stories and that their futile arguments turned into disdain, jealousy, and eventually murder.

As the human race expanded and nations were born we remember that God’s people, struggled to live in faith, struggled to follow God’s commandments, struggled to keep their communities whole and intact. In fact, the whole story of the Bible can be read as a beautifully tragic tale of a loving God in relationship with God’s own creation. This relationship of love is not so different from the ones that you and I know in our human relationships. It includes dreams and disappointments, commitment and failure, closeness and separation, and hopefully... in the end, New Creation born out of hard worn reconciliation.

This is the story we remember on nights like tonight when we gather together to give voice to our prayers, to confess to our brokenness, and to recognize our humanity in light of God’s divinity. Tonight we read from the book of Joel. It [Joel] is a short little book, tucked away with the 11 other “minor prophets”. Rarely noticed, quoted, or used in our liturgical calendars. Although, sometimes, at Pentecost, we hear one simple verse proclaimed:

*...I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;  
your sons and your daughters shall  
prophesy,  
your old men shall dream dreams,  
and your young men shall see visions. (2:28)*

It is a powerful promise of God’s continued presence among us. But the book of Joel has so much more to offer us than just this one hopeful verse.

In just three short chapters the prophet, Joel, describes a horrific event that has taken place in Judah. A plague of locusts and severe drought have decimated the land causing a shortage of food to eat and offerings to bring to the Temple.

*What the cutting locust left,  
the swarming locust has eaten.  
What the swarming locust has left,  
the hopping locust has eaten,  
and what the hopping locust left,  
the destroying locust has eaten. (1: 4)*

Everything is gone. Devoured by the locusts, scorched by the sun. The whole crop is ruined.

Later, the prophet likens the plague and drought to foreign armies invading the land as an extension of divine justice for a sinful and broken people. Individually and collectively the people have sinned against God. They have broken their covenant with God in their private devotional lives *and* in the ways that they treat one another. The result is complete and utter devastation. Literally and metaphorically, all that they once knew is gone.

From the rubble the people cry out.  
They are devastated.  
They feel abandoned.  
They are afraid.

The memory of this catastrophic plague was passed down from generation to generation and even now, as we read it in our Bibles, it bears witness to the fact that we are not alone in our brokenness. We may not understand or identify with the trouble of locusts and drought, but we certainly understand devastation, isolation, and fear. We know what it is to ask the questions: "Where are you God?" ... "Can't you see that I am dying here?" ... "Why aren't you helping me?" And when we feel that vulnerable, that broken, that unsafe and insecure we may be tempted to grasp onto whatever stronghold we can find, be it our savings accounts, our political solutions, our unhealthy relationships, our addictions, and our distractions. Sometimes, as chaos and destruction grow wild around us, we look to our past, we protect what we can remember, we cling to what used to be and we try all that we can to re-create it.

But that which is lost can never truly be reconstructed.

Fortunately for the prophet, for his people, and for us, that isn't the end of God's story unfolding in scripture or in our lives today.

From the rubble and devastation another voice cries out. Not the voice of the people, not the voice of the prophet, this time it is the voice of God saying:

*Return to me (even now)  
return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, with mourning...  
rend your hearts... (2:12)*

And in their returning promise comes:

*You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,  
And praise the name of the Lord your God  
Who has dealt wondrously with you...  
You shall know that [God]  
Is in the midst of God's won people.*

“Return” in Hebrew is a lot like the word, “repent,” in Greek. They both call for a complete re-orientation of the whole self, away from the paths of false security and self-destruction and toward the God who is the creator and redeemer of all creation.

In re-turning to God we release the promises of this world, those of prosperity and power and war-won peace, and we cling to God's promise that if we live in covenantal relationship with God and one another... God can, and God *will* make all things new.

In this season of Lent we pay attention to the journey of faith. We recognize that turning ourselves toward God is a life-long process of humility and growth. So, we begin with humility, recognizing our limitations, our brokenness and all the ways that we have – in fear – tried to secure our futures on the false promises of this world. But that stops tonight. Tonight, when we leave our pews and come forward to receive the blessing of the ashes, we remember that only faith, believed in our hearts, turned toward God, and lived in communion with one another will pull us out of this rubble and into God's New Creation.