

## Joel 2

2 Blow the horn in Zion;

give a shout on my holy mountain!

Let all the people of the land tremble,

for the day of the Lord is coming.

It is near—

2 a day of darkness and no light,

a day of clouds and thick darkness!

Like blackness spread out upon the mountains,

a great and powerful army[a] comes,

unlike any that has ever come before them,

or will come after them in centuries ahead.

12 Yet even now, says the Lord,

return to me with all your hearts,

with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow;

13 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.

14 Who knows whether he will have a change of heart

and leave a blessing behind him,

a grain offering and a drink offering

for the Lord your God?

15 Blow the horn in Zion;

demand a fast;

request a special assembly.

16 Gather the people;

prepare a holy meeting;

assemble the elders;

gather the children,

even nursing infants.

Let the groom leave his room

and the bride her chamber.

17 Between the porch and the altar

let the priests, the Lord's ministers, weep.

Let them say, "Have mercy, Lord, on your people,

and don't make your inheritance a disgrace,

an example of failure among the nations.

Why should they say among the peoples,

'Where is their God?'"

## **Psalm 51**

- 51 Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful love!  
Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great compassion!
- 2 Wash me completely clean of my guilt;  
purify me from my sin!
- 3 Because I know my wrongdoings,  
my sin is always right in front of me.
- 4 I've sinned against you—you alone.  
I've committed evil in your sight.  
That's why you are justified when you render your verdict,  
completely correct when you issue your judgment.
- 5 Yes, I was born in guilt, in sin,  
from the moment my mother conceived me.
- 6 And yes, you want truth in the most hidden places;  
you teach me wisdom in the most secret space.[a]
- 7 Purify me with hyssop and I will be clean;  
wash me and I will be whiter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear joy and celebration again;  
let the bones you crushed rejoice once more.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins;  
wipe away all my guilty deeds!
- 10 Create a clean heart for me, God;  
put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!
- 11 Please don't throw me out of your presence;  
please don't take your holy spirit away from me.
- 12 Return the joy of your salvation to me  
and sustain me with a willing spirit.
- 13 Then I will teach wrongdoers your ways,  
and sinners will come back to you.
- 14 Deliver me from violence, God, God of my salvation,  
so that my tongue can sing of your righteousness.
- 15 Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will proclaim your praise.
- 16 You don't want sacrifices.  
If I gave an entirely burned offering,  
you wouldn't be pleased.
- 17 A broken spirit is my sacrifice, God.[b]  
You won't despise a heart, God, that is broken and crushed.

## **2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10**

20 So we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us. We beg you as Christ's representatives, "Be reconciled to God!" 21 God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of

God. 6 1 Since we work together with him, we are also begging you not to receive the grace of God in vain. 2 He says, I listened to you at the right time, and I helped you on the day of salvation.[a] Look, now is the right time! Look, now is the day of salvation! 3 We don't give anyone any reason to be offended about anything so that our ministry won't be criticized. 4 Instead, we commend ourselves as ministers of God in every way. We did this with our great endurance through problems, disasters, and stressful situations. 5 We went through beatings, imprisonments, and riots. We experienced hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger. 6 We displayed purity, knowledge, patience, and generosity. We served with the Holy Spirit, genuine love, 7 telling the truth, and God's power. We carried the weapons of righteousness in our right hand and our left hand. 8 We were treated with honor and dishonor and with verbal abuse and good evaluation. We were seen as both fake and real, 9 as unknown and well known, as dying—and look, we are alive! We were seen as punished but not killed, 10 as going through pain but always happy, as poor but making many rich, and as having nothing but owning everything.

### **Matthew 6**

6 "Be careful that you don't practice your religion in front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. 2 "Whenever you give to the poor, don't blow your trumpet as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may get praise from people. I assure you, that's the only reward they'll get. 3 But when you give to the poor, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing 4 so that you may give to the poor in secret. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you. 5 "When you pray, don't be like hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them. I assure you, that's the only reward they'll get. 6 But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you. 16 "And when you fast, don't put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They distort their faces so people will know they are fasting. I assure you that they have their reward. 17 When you fast, brush your hair and wash your face. 18 Then you won't look like you are fasting to people, but only to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 19 "Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. 20 Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don't eat them and where thieves don't break in and steal them. 21 Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

## Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

So this is how our Lenten journey begins: with a smudge. And most of the world won't recognize the power of that smudge. A token few will bear this mark as well once we leave this place. We'll share knowing glances and subtle nods, acknowledging the burdens we bear for the days to come and even moreso the burden we don't have to bear because Jesus bore it instead. But many others will look at us with confusion. I met someone after an Ash Wednesday service a few years ago, and they just plumb stared into my forehead as we talked. Eventually, though they refused to ask, I took the social cue and explained it was part of a religious ritual of repentance and commitment to change, but you'd have thought that bit of burnt palm had turned my forehead into a tap dancing alien. Still others, though we see them, won't notice at all, whether buried in their mobile devices or too concerned with putting out fires in their lives to notice the way that God brings new life through the ashes of our world.

Perhaps this smudge is fitting, though, for our journey to Lent begins with the smudge of a different sort, the smudge of sin. And of course, most of the world doesn't recognize the power of that smudge either. Many around us minimize the role of sin or deny it's existence altogether. Anytime we deny climate change, systemic injustice for women, racial minorities, or LGBTQ+ people, the problems of inequality within our systems of finance or governance, we deny the work of sin in the world. But none of this, whether the sin in our own lives or the sin in our society, is natural to our God-given existence. Like the ashen cross that will soon don our foreheads, sin's mark also appears as an abnormal tattoo on the bodies God's given us. After all, neither sin nor ashes are our birthmark. We certainly are dust, and to dust we

shall return, but what's permanent is that God promises to do with us just as God did with Adam: to hold us close and breathe new life into the ashes of our lives.

Something to remember, though, is that our Lenten journey isn't ultimately for us or about us. It's about God, and it's for the world. Through it, surely we should experience change by coming into contact with something new of God's holiness. But the purpose of this journey isn't self congratulatory, nor is it isolated. The smudge of the ashes is meant to nudge us toward our neighbors. Well, while that rhyme is nice, it's not really strong enough. Ash Wednesday, and indeed this season of Lent, is meant to thrust us into the world as God's change agents.

But to become change agents, we must first experience change ourselves. We must allow God's transformation to take hold of our lives. When we take seriously the reflective practices of Lent - deeper in prayer, more frequent in scripture, more active in service to others, and yes, fasting - we come to see that Lent is a season of purposeful reflection and repentance, a purpose defined by God as the redemption and reunification of all things in Jesus. God wants to get the band back together.

One of the ways that we mark this is through taking on a Lenten discipline, whether fasting from something or taking on a new habit. We often fast from food or swearing, or sometimes we take on a different prayer style or devotional habit, though these things most often change after Easter. One of my colleagues, Sarah Taylor, pointed out that fasting is much like a hunger strike, that fasting is a form of protest. It's refusing to do something or changing something in our public behavior as a sign of our protest against sin's work in our world and a public declaration that we want a new reality, that we hope for and expect a new reality, to appear through God's work.

Tonight, many of you may have already chosen a Lenten discipline, while others may still be scrambling for something to do. Let me share something that Michelle came up with, something that I think is worth all of us doing, something that I see as a sign of protest to the kind of consumerism that demands our attention and draws our allegiance away from God. Michelle's idea was to, instead, foster more lasting change by giving away one thing every day throughout Lent. We've all got so much stuff that I think this is a pretty incredible idea, because once we give it away, it's gone. We've got so much stuff in our lives that calls for our attention and distracts us from God's voice, so I'd like to challenge everyone to consider this cleansing in your lives. Not only do we protest the authority that it has in our lives, but we actually rid ourselves of it. We've even set up collection bins so we can see together how much we don't need, how much we're willing to share.

You see, not only are we from dust and will return to dust, but all of the stuff, the material possessions in our lives, they too will one day be pummeled into grit like the ashes on our faces. But God's not going to breathe new life into place settings or nearly forgotten sporting goods that take up spaces in our homes. No antiques or guns, no themed t-shirts or Xbox Ones, no technology, no clothing, no toys, no appliances, nothing in our closets, basements, garages, or storage units no thing that we own can save us, even though we often feel like our life would somehow be incomplete without it.

Yet, there are other people who could benefit from these things because of the needs that they have. Let's be clear that this isn't just about sprucing up our lives. We're not talking just about cleansing our drawers of holey socks or the crawl space of broken TVs. We're talking about giving away things of some value but that we've given too much value. In someone else's hands, they could serve a better purpose, a life-giving purpose. So we aren't

throwing away junk. We're fasting from things we don't need so that they can be used more properly in someone else's life.

For me, I've got to start with this silly pizza stone. It's perfectly fine. I got it for a great deal on Groupon when we lived in Durham. And, to my recollection, we've used it a grand total of one time in the past 4 or 5 years since we first bought it. Yet, every time Michelle encourages me to give it away, I hesitate, as though that magical moment will appear when I'll need a pizza stone. For some unknown, illogical reason, I've given it enough power in my life to move it from Durham, NC to Columbia, SC to Radford, VA. Well, not anymore. It's time to let this go.

It may not seem like much, but if every day during Lent we can each detach ourselves from the pizza stones in our lives, we can come more closely into contact with Christ. The spaces left by those idols in our homes can be filled more with God. Even more so, by giving away good things to people who can use them, we move from idolatry to compassion, to sharing the things we have with those who have greater needs than us. All this stuff is going to turn to dust anyway, so why are we so attached to it? We can share out of our abundance so that others may experience some small sign of God's desire to share life. Paul tells us that we're Christ's ambassadors, and this is one tangible way to both increase our discipleship by relying more on God and increase our tangible witness to God's compassion in the world.

However you decide to practice your piety this Lent, remember that we're each sent from here as ambassadors with ashes. We're not ambassadors for ashes, or ambassadors of ashes, but ambassadors with ashes. Ashes aren't the point of tonight's worship; rather, ashes point to the deep reality that without God, everything would burn to rubble without any hope for restoration. Ashes are a sign of our penitence, of our need for God, and of what the world we be without God. Without God, we'd return to the dust and never have reason to expect

resurrection. When we become too tied to our stuff, or food, or sex, or money, or power, or anything, we worship stuff that's just ultimately ashes. But for all that God created, there's powerful good news: God takes these ashes and breathes the breath of the Holy Spirit into them. There's life on the other side of the ashes.

So tonight, I'll make a cross of ashes on your forehead to remind you of this one, simple promise from God: when everything turns to ash, Jesus still remains, and so there's always, always, always reason to hope. Amen.