

ASH WEDNESDAY | SERMON

Joel 2:1-2,12-17 | 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 | Matthew 6:1-6,16-21 | The Rev. Barnabas Pusnur | St. Paul & the Redeemer | March 2, 2022

"Return to me with all your heart." This is what God tells his people through the prophet Joel.

In the cycle of nature there is a lot of returning. The plant which blooms and grows from a seed in the ground, will one day die and return to the ground. This Ash Wednesday, we will be reminded of the same return for all humanity. "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." Even our faith has Jesus returning to his heavenly abode through the way of the cross and resurrection.

While these are examples of a one-time return, nature also has returns which keep happening at regular intervals. The sun returns every morning, seasons return at their time every year, many species of animals migrate in certain seasons and then return yearly, we leave our houses for work every day and then return at the end of the day.

Ash Wednesday is about being reminded about both the one-time return and the everyday returns. The prophet Joel writes at a time when Judah was going through an extreme amount of turmoil at a national scale. There is catastrophe all around. It looked like there was no end to the devastation. Prophet Joel writes: "What the cutting locust left,
the swarming locust has eaten.
What the swarming locust left,
the hopping locust has eaten,
and what the hopping locust left,
the destroying locust has eaten."

There was no respite. It was a time very similar to ours: our world is besieged with a natural catastrophe of the pandemic and the with death and destruction due to wars. It was in such a context that God says, "Return to

me." He again says, "Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful." I wonder what it means for us to return to God this season of Lent. To return to our very source of existence, to return to one who is full of compassion and love, to return to one who is calling us to return. I wonder what it means to return to God as individuals and return as a community, as a nation, as one humanity.

Prophet Joel reminds that one thing that returning to God involves is lament. He exhorts the community to come together for the ritual of fasting, weeping, & mourning and to rend their hearts. Return goes through a process of lament, of brokenness, of vulnerability. When our loved ones pass away and return to God we lament & grieve. When we are overwhelmed by trying times, we return to God with prayers of desperation. When we are convicted of sin and callousness, we return to God with contrition and sorrow.

"Return to me with all your heart" says God. "With all your heart." There is no half-hearted grieving for our loved ones, there is no half-hearted desperation in prayer, there is no half-hearted sorrow at the contrition we feel when we are convicted of sin. With all our hearts, let us return to God today. Let us return to God tomorrow. Let us return to God every day of Lent, and every time we find ourselves far from the God who is gracious and merciful to us.

In today's New Testament reading, we see a similar idea of returning to God. But here instead of the word return, St. Paul commends us to be reconciled with God. "We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." Reconciliation is needed when there is estrangement. And oh my, is our world estranged from God. Our presiding bishop keeps reminding us "if it's not about

love it is not about God." Unfortunately, we live in a world where we often find the absence of love- within oneself, within families, in neighborhoods, in societies, and in countries. And where there is no love, we have in an estrangement with God and with one another. St. Paul wrote this second letter to Corinthians in a context of great personal conflict, pain, and hurt, with the members of the church. He was being misunderstood, he was being accused of being crafty and deceitful, he had written a 'letter of tears' to them earlier, he was deeply hurt by a member in his previous visit. On top of that there were new missionaries to that church who portrayed a picture that Paul's work and ministry among them was a failure. The relationship between Paul and this church exemplified the complete breakdown of human relationship. Hurt and pain, and anger and frustration, marked their relationship.

As Paul defends himself in this letter, he also sees that his entire ministry is a ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation with God and with fellow human beings even when things seem extremely bad. To be a part of God's work in our lives and in the world, is to be part of the ministry of reconciliation. This lent as we return to God, may we know that there is reconciliation needed.

Reconciliation in Christ to God, and reconciliation in Christ to one another. Our efforts and desires may not always produce the results we so desperately hope for as we want to mend broken relationships. However, I believe our openness to reconciliation, our openness to giving and receiving forgiveness, our openness to God's work of reconciliation in our lives is what is needed. How the reconciliation happens with others, even if it ever does, may not be in our hands, but that we do our part is all that we may be asked for.

Let us return to God, let us be reconciled to God. Let us lament, and let us hope. In this journey of return and reconciliation we are not alone. In this journey, God's loving and watchful presence is always with us. He does not leave us on our own. He does not forget us. He is constantly looking at us and is with us. The Gospel according to Matthew says, even when we fast, pray, or give alms in secret, God is constantly watching over us. You and I are not hidden from God.

This lent may our hearts be open to God's working in our lives. May we be engulfed by the presence and love of God for us, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. Amen.